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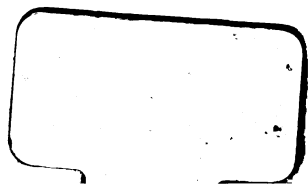
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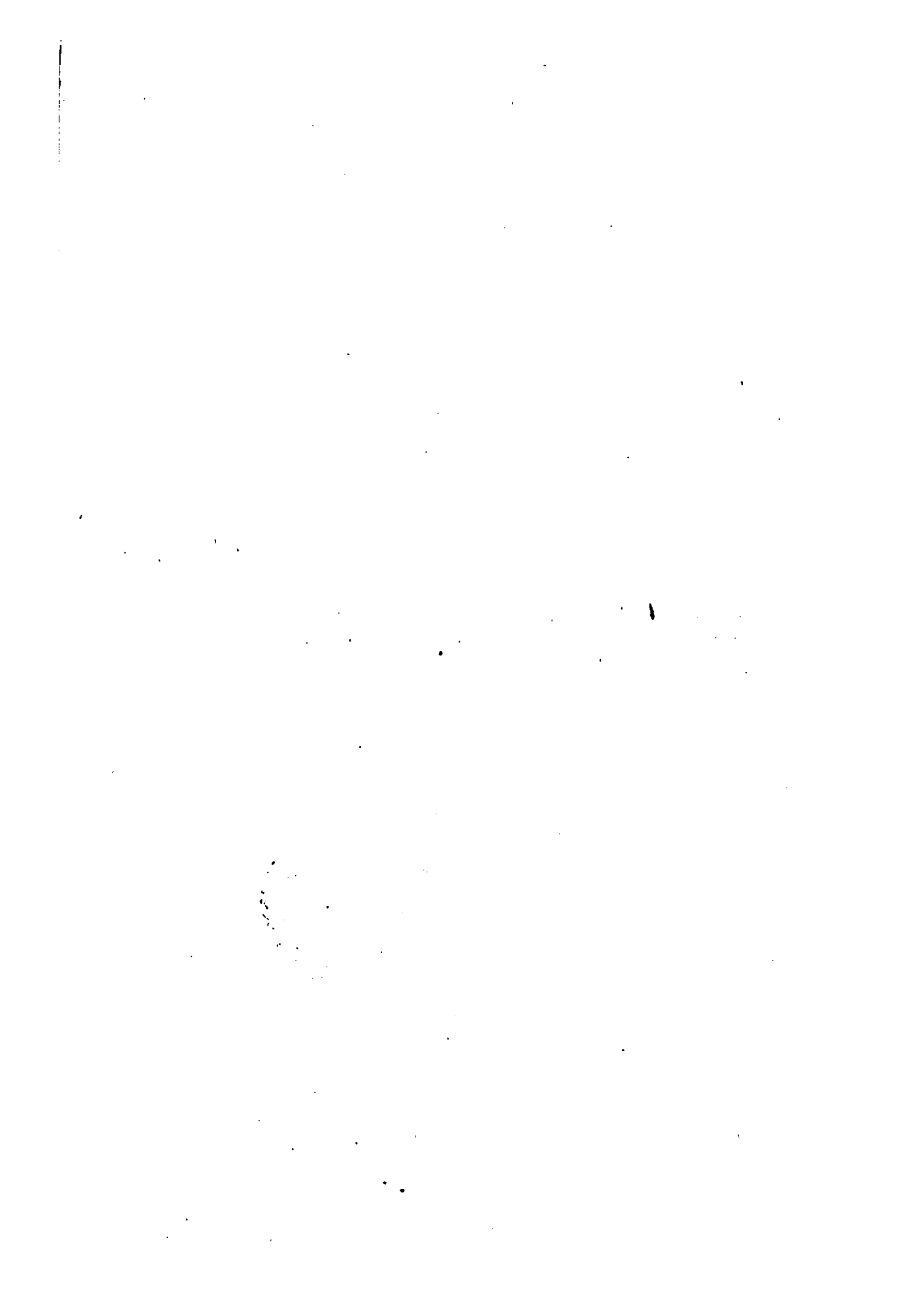


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IS HE THE MAN?



IS HE THE MAN?

A Novel.

BY

W. CLARK RUSSELL,

AUTHOR OF

"JOHN HOLDSWORTH: CHIEF MATE," "JILTED," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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IS HE THE MAN?

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY.

(Continued.)

V.

F MIGHT hope now that the mystery which had puzzled everybody for the last five months was about to be solved, and all the trouble and suspicion it had brought melt into thin air.

It was not to be supposed that the man employed by Colonel Kilmain, after promising to write only in the event of utter failure or complete success, would, after four months of patient inquiry, during which he would in all probability have met with several men sufficiently like Mr. Ransome to put him on his guard against being duped by a passable resemblance, commit

himself to such a deliberate assurance as would take the Colonel post-haste to London, without good and sufficient reason.

We at Gardenhurst had nothing to do but await the issue of the adventure. That the man living in lodgings out of Oxford Street, London, was Mr. Ransome was one thing; that Colonel Kilmain could induce Mr. Ransome to accompany him to Gardenhurst was another thing. In this last arrangement I anticipated a very serious hitch would take place; and how the Colonel would manage I could not guess.

So that day passed, and the next, and a third, and the Colonel neither wrote nor returned.

Meanwhile Mrs. Ransome had resumed her reserve. She was, to all appearance, as lifeless, cold, and indifferent as if her father's quest were of less concern to her than to me. I could not comprehend this disposition, which was not to be accounted for by assigning it to the belief of her husband's death, which she had expressed. Unless she positively knew that he was dead, and of course I was perfectly sure she did not, she ought, in all reason, to have

found some cause of excitement, of anxiety, of curiosity, of hope in the issue which any near day was to expose. She appeared to me to be governed by a sense of unendurable wrong, which turned her into stone, dried up all the sources of passion and feeling, and left her a mere image, barely directed by mechanical instincts. If this were the true cause of her dead and icy behaviour, it was, beyond all question, in a large measure owing to the suspicion her father had entertained against her. The prejudice and the hostile accusations of strangers and acquaintances had heated her to passion and scorn; but her father's doubt would break her down, transmute her nature into rock, and fill her with that sense of utter loneliness, which forces all feeling, passion, and emotion inwards, and makes the soul heedless of her own interests, and of all the influences and movements which surround her.

The fourth day since the Colonel's departure came and went. Had the detective mistaken the man he had summoned the Colonel to see? Surely Mrs. Ransome would receive a letter next morning. I confess I

awaited news with profound eagerness and curiosity. But the fifth morning came and brought no letter.

That was a wintry day I remember : bleak and dry with spaces of snow stretched among the hills and a steel-coloured sky. The fires burned fiercely, and in the passages of the house one's breath rose like steam. The birds made black knots among the bare branches ; and sounds from the town—the ringing of bells, the cries of men, the rattling of wheels—came thin and clear through the air up to the heights where Gardenhurst stood.

The morning passed. I saw Mrs. Ransome, but she made no comment on her father's silence ; and ardent as my own curiosity was, I had not the courage to thrust my conjectures upon her frigid reserve.

At three o'clock in the afternoon I was in my bedroom, when I heard the sounds of carriage wheels rolling over the iron ground of the avenue. I threw open the door and went out on to the landing and listened. The hall-bell pealed and I hurried downstairs. My idea was that the Colonel had

returned with Mr. Ransome, and my curiosity was so superior to all other considerations that I would not have missed being in the hall to receive the runaway, to see whether he was changed, to hear what he would say, for a purse full of money. This may seem improper ; but I am quite willing to admit that in a large number of points I was not a jot better than I should be.

I was in the hall as soon as the housemaid, and I stood by her side as she opened the door. In came the Colonel wrapped in his over-coat, his throat muffled up and his hat drawn down to his ears. A closed fly stood at the door and the horse smoked like newly-kindled leaves.

"Where is Mrs Ransome ?" the Colonel exclaimed, pausing a moment before passing through the anteroom. Yet he was too impatient even to wait for an answer, for he ran through the room, and the door blew to behind him with a bang.

I stared into the fly, but it was empty. The driver, enveloped in a number of capes, pulled out a pipe and a tinder-box and began to smoke.

"Are you to wait ?" I asked him..

He replied that that was his orders.

I closed the door and followed the housemaid downstairs.

A whole half-hour passed, during which no sound save the movements of the servants in the kitchen broke the silence that reigned in the house. Whatever the conversation was about upstairs, it was manifestly carried on in very low voices. I sat over the fire, listening and wondering what had brought the Colonel home in such a violent hurry, and what he had been doing during the last five days, and whether by keeping the carriage waiting he meant to return to London.

At the expiration of the half-hour I heard the Colonel calling my name from the top of the stairs, and hastening from my room, I found him standing in the hall muffled up just as he had emerged from the fly.

He beckoned me into the library and shut the door. He did not remove his hat, nor did he pull his muffler below his mouth : the consequence of which was, his voice was smothered and I had to listen intently to catch what he said.

“Mr. Ransome is found. We have him at last. You will be glad to hear this.”

"Sincerely glad, sir," I answered, impressed by the eager, frightened expression in his eyes, and by the singular paleness of his face : which signs I attributed to the excitement under which he was labouring.

"I must return at once, for I have to be in London to-night," he continued, hurrying out his words. "I would not bring him to Copsford before apprising my daughter of the discovery and telling her my plans. He declares he will not live with her. But he has consented to come to this house for an hour in order to meet such gentlemen as I may chose to invite and let them see that he is living. His stipulation is that on the termination of this interview he is at liberty to withdraw ; and he has exacted a promise from me neither to follow nor in any way to molest him."

"That is all that you require, sir?" I exclaimed, to the full as excited by the news as he was.

"That's all. I have threatened him with the madhouse should he refuse to accede to my wishes. I told him that my daughter is suspected of having murdered

him, and that he alone can clear her of the horrible suspicion."

"But are you not afraid that he will make off whilst you are here?"

"No; he is watched. I know my man, and do not trust his promises. I must make haste; I hope to return to-morrow."

He waved his hand, hurried out of the library, and before I could reach the hall door the carriage had driven away.

His haste was extremely agitating and flurrying; and though, perhaps, it could not exaggerate the importance of the news he brought, it wonderfully helped to impress its consequence and value upon my mind.

I went to the dining-room, partly because I wanted to hear what Mrs. Ransome had to say, and partly because I believed she would expect me to come to her. I knocked, opened the door, looked in, and found the room empty. The drawing-room was also empty. I tried her bedroom, and there discovered her, with the door locked. She called out that she was lying down, and wished to be alone. So I returned downstairs.

There was nothing more reasonable than

that she should be too much upset for a time by the news her father had brought her to be able to converse. The arrangement agreed on between her husband and the Colonel, though manifestly the most suitable and politic one that could have been entered upon, was not the less extraordinary, and the bare consideration of it would be very trying to her. If I had gathered the Colonel's meaning aright, Mr. Ransome was to meet several gentlemen from Copsford, and having satisfied them that his wife was an innocent woman, quit her for ever. This was very well, and as it should be, and what, no doubt, she wanted ; but to a woman possessed of her pride, the antidote was almost as bad as the bane. The meeting of persons at her house would be the publishing of her misery ; it would be known that her husband refused to live with her, and ugly constructions would in consequence be placed on her temper and character. So that she would only escape one prejudice to become the victim of another.

As these considerations occurred to me, I wondered whether the Colonel's wisest

policy, after all, would not have been long ago to remove his daughter from Copsford, and leave the truth to be unfolded by time. There could be no doubt that Mrs. Ransome's presence in the neighbourhood had perpetuated the story, and supplied an incessant provocation to gossip. But then the Colonel's view was, that his daughter's departure would corroborate suspicion. Again, the idea of his daughter being followed by suspicion was unendurable to him ; and so sensitive a man would never have ceased to reproach himself for allowing gossip to frighten him and his daughter away before he had made every effort to vindicate her from the infamous charge which old Mrs. Ransome, dying, had bequeathed to the people of Copsford.

I had not had time, during our brief exchange of words in the library, to ask the Colonel if Mr. Ransome had spoken of Maddox. In all probability, as I had over and over again surmised, the man had acted without the knowledge of his master, and had, by accident, hit on the night on which Mr. Ransome had decamped to commit the robbery.

The Colonel had no doubt spoken of this to his daughter ; and I waited with lively feelings of curiosity for an opportunity to converse with her.

My impatience was not long taxed. Scarcely an hour had passed since the Colonel had left the house, when I heard a footstep on the kitchen stair, and Mrs. Ransome came into my room.

She rarely visited this part of the house now, and I might be sure, by her coming, that her purpose was to talk to me about Mr. Ransome.

She closed the door with a little shiver, and complained of the cold, hugging a shawl over her shoulders about her, and taking a seat close to the fire. I looked at her face attentively, attracted by an expression that rendered her beauty almost unfamiliar. I could no more describe it in words than paint it in colours. A bitter hardness, that set the mouth as firm as stone, was its abiding characteristic. But neither resolution nor severity was all that it suggested : fear was there, suppressed and beaten down, indeed, but leaving traces of its presence in every glance, in every movement of the

lineaments; and there was a submissiveness about her, too, which had been heretofore utterly foreign to her haughty bearing.

She spoke of the cold, and was then silent, with her eyes on the fire. After an interval, she asked if it were I who had knocked at her door an hour ago? I answered, yes. She was again silent, and her silence puzzled me. If she did not wish to speak about her husband, why had she sought me? But it was difficult to understand why she should not wish to speak of him. Here was a mystery, that had engrossed her for many months, solved at last. In a few hours the suspicion that had weighed like a nightmare upon her would be removed. Should not such a removal fill her with exultation, and so charge her heart with thoughts and hopes that she would be wild to utter them?

Her silence was so unaccountable and oppressive, that I broke it at last by floundering headlong into the matter which occupied my mind.

"This is a happy termination of all your troubles, madam. I am as truly glad to hear that Mr. Ransome is found as if my

own character were involved in the discovery."

She looked up, and said quickly—

"Oh, you know, then, that the man papa went to see is Mr. Ransome?"

"Yes. Colonel Kilmain hurriedly gave me the news before he left."

"What did he tell you?"

"That he had found Mr. Ransome, and compelled him by threats to come and testify to his being alive, by meeting certain gentlemen whom your father will invite here for the purpose."

"Was that all?"

"There was no time to say more."

She clasped her hands over her knees, and stared fixedly into the fire.

"Is Mr. Ransome aware of his mother's death?" I asked.

"Oh yes; papa told him, of course," she answered, without looking at me.

"He was fond of his mother. I should think the news would be a great blow to him."

"He would rather have heard of my death, no doubt."

"Was anything said about Maddox, do you know, madam?"

"Oh, Mr. Ransome knows nothing about the footman," she replied, following up my question so rapidly that she almost took the words out of my mouth.

"Then my theory was right, after all!" I exclaimed. "Maddox stole the plate on his own account. I always believed him guilty on the evidence of the book I found in his bedroom."

"Not always. You once agreed with me that he might have acted under Mr. Ransome's instructions."

"Why, yes, madam; at the beginning I did. But that was a long time ago: and in those early days of the mystery we were all too puzzled to be able to think at all."

"You must understand," she said, "that we have only Mr. Ransome's word that Maddox was not concerned with him. Mr. Ransome is as great a liar as his mother, and I should refuse to take his assurance."

She said this warmly, but quickly controlled herself, and looked at me with a smile that accorded ill with the acrimony of her words.

"Has Mr. Ransome explained his object for running away?" I inquired, sensible of

and struck by the bitterness of her manner, which was inconsistent with the subject we were discussing, and which was the more apparent for the coating of feeling and interest which she tried to hide it under.

"He is mad!" she exclaimed, with a shrug. "You must find your explanation in that."

"Mad, indeed!" I responded. "Imagine his stopping four months in an out of the way London lodging! What answer has he to the charge of striving to ruin you by pretending that he was murdered?"

"Miserable coward!" she cried, clenching both hands spasmodically: "he has no answer. He is a devil, who does evil for evil's sake."

"I suppose Colonel Kilmain had great difficulty in obtaining an interview with him?"

"Oh, very great, no doubt. But, Miss Avory," she exclaimed, turning smartly upon me, "you must remember that my father was in a great hurry, and had no time to relate the whole story to me. You ask me a great number of questions, to many of which I can only imagine answers."

I coloured up as I said—

“I must apologize for my curiosity. The subject has occupied our attention for so long a time, that I cannot prevent myself from taking a great interest in it.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, forcing a smile, but looking nevertheless towards the door, as though nothing but a sense of duty kept her in the room, “I fully appreciate your sympathy, and gladly tell you all I know. Mr. Ransome, I believe, is to return with papa to-morrow, and will stay at Copsford, I fancy—but of this I am not sure—for a few hours: long enough to enable him to be present at the meeting which is to take place in this house. He then leaves me, and we shall see each other no more. But now I am telling you what you know.”

I remained silent, not wishing to challenge another reproof.

“I would part with ten years of my life,” she continued, “for Mr. Ransome to give proofs of his being alive by any other means than that of meeting people in this house. Of all the humiliating positions that man has put me in since I first met him, this will be the worst. For, do you know that

papa will insist upon his stating his reasons for leaving me; and what will be said when he declares he will not live with me? when he may utter falsehood after falsehood to win the sympathy that cowards are never able to get on without?"

"It is, indeed, a very hard alternative," I answered; "but I see no better alternative. Your father wishes to prove the scandalmongers liars; and he is wise in making the proofs thorough—in obtaining men, whose testimony will be indisputable, to see and speak to this man, whom the people think has been murdered."

She made no answer to this; and presently left her chair and took a turn or two about the room. She twitched at her shawl, and exclaimed—

"I am chilled to the bones. There is no fire in my bedroom, and the window-glass is varnished with frost."

"Let me get you a cup of tea, madam."

"No, thank you."

She looked at me steadily, then averted her eyes, and said—

"Mr. Ransome, I believe, does not admit that his leaving me was part of a plot which

his mother was to carry out. But there is no doubt that this was his motive."

"You have always thought so," I answered."

"Yes; and papa agrees with me now, and so have you agreed with me sometimes."

"At all events, the theory explains the extraordinary accusation that old Mrs. Ransome made against you."

"You may be sure I am right. And how is such villany to be met but with deceit? I mean," she added, hurriedly, looking at me in a vague way, "when you have a madman to deal with you are privileged to use the best stratagem that occurs to you to render him harmless."

"Unquestionably," I answered, thinking that she referred to the mode in which her father had trapped Mr. Ransome, and obliged him to meet witnesses at Gardenhurst.

Her manner changed; she laid her hand on the door, and said, with a smile—

"There is nothing more to be said on this subject at present. We must wait."

"Yes, madam. Please God in a day or

two your troubles will be ended, and then I hope Colonel Kilmain will take you away for a change of scene. Your health has been undermined by your anxiety."

"We shall see," she answered; smiled again, and went out. But before she closed the door I heard her sigh heavily.

VI.

The Colonel did not return next day. The day following was Thursday. At noon I walked to Copsford to make some purchases, and on my way home met Mrs. Campion. I at once told her that Mr. Ransome was found, and was expected to arrive at Gardenhurst with the Colonel every hour; at which she looked thunder-struck, and exclaimed, again and again, "Well, I never!"

"So you see," I remarked, "that you have all been cruelly wronging Mrs. Ransome."

"Yes, indeed. And I feel as if I would rather have bitten my tongue off than said an ill-natured word of her. But I never

believed what was reported. No, I give you my word I didn't, Miss Ivory. What I really expected was, that she had drove her husband, by her temper, into running away and committing suicide, or something of that sort. As to murdering him," she tossed her hands and shook her head.

"The gossips will have something else to talk about now," said I.

"Well," she cried, "you have given me a start! Mr. Ransome found after all this time! What in the name of goodness has the man been doing with himself?"

"Keeping company with cats," I answered, laughing. "Living in London lodgings, lying close all day, and creeping forth like a rat at night. If the busybodies here had only taken the trouble to remember that this miserable individual is *mad*, a vast deal of mischief would have been saved, and the trouble that has half broken Mrs. Ransome's heart averted."

"Oh dear!" she cried: "I am as much to blame as anybody; for though I never believed half the things that were said, I've consented to them by listening

without contradicting. How angry Mrs. Parsons will be ! All along she's been saying that Mrs. Ransome killed her husband and that the law isn't equal. There'll be some jokes at her expense, I warrant. There are others too as confident as confident i' the truth of the story, who wont relish being proved false."

"I quite believe you. We are all so kind and charitable that there's not a man or a woman among us but will take Mrs. Ransome's innocence as a heavy personal disappointment.—I must be getting home. Good-by, Mrs. Campion. Remember me to your husband."

The air was nipping, and I walked quickly. The bleak hills made the landscape desolate. On the summits of many of them the snow lay thick and the trees resembled black skeletons upon the white ground. The road was resonant, the hedges looked hard as bayonets and the wind froze the ploughed lumps of soil in the fields into rocks. When I was close to Gardenhurst a fly drawn by a single horse, came down the hill and drew up opposite the gateway. From it issued the Colonel, who gave some instructions to

the driver. The fly then drove off, going up the hill.

I advanced quickly, and the Colonel hearing footsteps behind him, halted.

"Oh, is it you, Miss Ivory?" he exclaimed. "I saw you just now, but did not recognise you. I have come from Peterham. Mr. Ransome is there. We left by the night-coach from London and arrived this morning at ten. Does my daughter expect me?"

"Yes, sir. She thought you would return yesterday."

"I could not, for reasons I will explain to her. Mr. Ransome refused to go to Copsford. He is stubborn—wretchedly stubborn—as all mad people are. And I dare not be too exacting lest he should defy me by turning tail again."

He was going to knock, but I asked him to step round to the garden entrance where the door might be opened from without. He laughed, and said that he must be losing his memory not to think of this, and walked down the side path hastily. He was muffled up to the throat, just as I had before seen him : his manner was jerky and feverish :

he showed no signs of weariness in his movements, though I should have thought, considering the repeated journeys he had taken, that he would by this time be utterly fagged out.

His daughter saw him from the dining-room window and came out to meet him. They entered the room together, and I went upstairs to remove my bonnet. When, after ten minutes or thereabouts, I descended, the dining-room door stood open, and the Colonel hearing my footsteps called to me. I went in and found them seated before the fire. The Colonel had unmuffled himself and was warming his hands, red with the cold, by holding them close to the blaze. He requested me to shut the door, and pulled a chair close to the fire, making way himself, and begging me to draw near. However, my self-respect would not permit me to encroach in this manner ; so feigning not to hear, I took a seat at a proper distance and prepared myself to attend to what he should say.

“ We desire to have no secrets from you, Miss Ivory,” he began, assuming a smile which curiously recalled the expression Mrs.

Ransome's face had worn two days before when she came to my room after her father had left the house. "You have been in some degree an actor in this strange affair throughout and deserve our united thanks for the resolute manner in which you have championed our interests. It is only just that I should acquaint you not only with my actions but with my intentions."

"I can assure you, sir," I replied, "that I feel an interest very superior to mere curiosity in this affair, and will only be too glad to do anything I can to bring Mrs. Ransome's troubles to a speedy termination."

She turned her head and thanked me with a smile.

"I have put down," he said, first chafing his hands and then drawing forth a pocket-book, "the names of four gentlemen whom I mean to invite here this evening to meet Mr. Ransome. When I have lunched I shall write the letters myself, and must ask you to do me the favour to deliver them at their respective addresses. More than this: you will greatly oblige me by personally seeing these gentlemen and learning from

their own lips whether they can attend or not. The fly that brought me here will return at two o'clock, and by four your round of visits will have been completed."

"Your letters, I suppose, sir, will explain your wishes; and my simple business is to hear whether it is convenient to them to keep the appointment you make."

"That is all. If one or two of them only can come I must invite others. I consider, in the interests of my daughter, who has been cruelly prejudiced by the false statements of Mr. Ransome's mother, that we cannot do with less than with four credible witnesses—men of position in the town, whose word is unimpeachable."

He turned the leaves of the pocket-book, and read aloud:—

"Mr. Skerlock, Dane Villa, High Street; Mr. Ledbury, Homersham House, Queen's Road; Sir Anthony Lauder, The Vale; the Reverend Henry Hastings, 9, Albion Square. The first three are magistrates; the fourth, being a clergyman, will make, of course, a highly respectable witness."

"Should any of these gentlemen be out when I call, am I to wait?"

"You must use your judgment, Miss Avory. I would rather have these gentlemen than any others I know. But you must not wait too long; the appointment is for eight o'clock to-night. I must know certainly by five if these gentlemen can attend."

"They may think the notice rather short, sir," I suggested.

"I cannot help that. I have a madman to deal with, and must conform to *him*. He refuses to show himself at Copsford for fear of being hooted. He stipulates to come to and leave this house under cover of night; to remain here only for such a length of time as shall enable the witnesses to see and address him, and then to leave, having already imposed a binding obligation on me not to follow, or have him followed, nor take any measures to ascertain where he goes after he quits Gardenhurst."

He glanced hurriedly at his daughter as he spoke. She did not remove her eyes from the fire. He added, with a strange nervous smile playing over his face, not only exaggerating his haggard looks, but expressing the most profound uneasiness—

"It is not necessary to explain to *you* his motive for insisting on these conditions."

"Miss Ivory herself once threatened him with the madhouse," said Mrs. Ransome, without looking around.

"It is fortunate that he is to be influenced by that threat," I exclaimed, "or he might decline to show himself."

"Oh, he would decline," cried the Colonel, quickly. "He held out for some days; but I terrified him at last."

"Did you say he is at Peterham, sir?" I asked.

"Yes; he is not known there."

"Have you left him in charge of anybody?"

He answered me with a faint but a genuine smile, which made me look at him curiously.

"Suppose he should take it into his head to run away, sir?"

"Whilst I am here, you mean? He'll not do that. He knows I would have him hunted down. He has been seen by too many persons to escape me."

He now pulled out a slip of paper scrawled over in pencil; he adjusted his

glasses ; and whilst I watched him I thought over that odd smile of his, and wondered what there had been in my question to amuse him.

"This is the draught of the letter, Phoebe, I mean to send by Miss Ivory," he said.

I rose.

"Pray keep your seat," he exclaimed, looking at me over his glasses. "I scratched these headings as I came from Peterham. I think they will do."

He read : "Dear Sir,—A dreadful suspicion, the nature of which I need not enter upon, having my daughter for its object, has been, and still is, current among the inhabitants of Copsford. In order to disprove the false accusations preferred against my child by the late Mrs. Ransome, I have had diligent inquiries made for Mr. Ransome, and have been so fortunate as to find him. My own assurance of this fact might not satisfy the scruples of those who have made it their business to give currency to the atrocious report to which I have referred ; nor, under the circumstances, should I consider my own word sufficiently emphatic

to substantially vindicate my daughter. I have, therefore, to beg that you will do me the honour to attend at my house this evening, at eight o'clock, in order to meet Mr. Ransome, and bear witness in the interests both of humanity and justice to the groundlessness of the scandal that has deeply affected my daughter's mind, and injured her health. Believe me, &c."

The reading of this letter was made so much to resemble a piece of acting by the absent way in which Mrs. Ransome listened to it, that a suspicion, to which I could give no words, entered my head. It took my thoughts away, and I neglected to make any comment on the conclusion of the letter. Looking up, I met the Colonel's eyes fixed on my face; but in a second he turned to his daughter and said—

"Will that letter do, Phoebe?"

"Very well, I think, papa."

"How does it strike you, Miss Ivory?" he asked, with a smile utterly unlike the brief glimpse of honest amusement I had caught before.

"It is an invitation they are pretty sure to accept, sir."

"Then it will answer the end it is written for."

The housemaid came in to lay the cloth for lunch, and I left the room, receiving from the Colonel a very politely worded injunction to hold myself in readiness for the arrival of the fly.

Dinner awaited me in my room, and I sat down to it at once, and never seasoned a meal with deeper cogitation. I was very much puzzled. There had been signs and looks, and an over-shrouding air which gave to the conversation that had just terminated a thoroughly perplexing unsatisfactoriness. What made Mrs. Ransome so listless? What made the Colonel so nervous and forced in his manner? I had expected in both of them a very different reception from this, of the fortunate termination of the inquiries for Mr. Ransome. A genuine satisfaction, I should have thought, was bound to prevail over the repugnance to the ordeal which Mrs. Ransome had yet to pass through. The suspicion that had long lain upon her was a heavy pressure, from the relief of which the spirits would rise and inspire a glad behaviour.

Yet everything was so straightforward that my inquisitive doubts could find nothing to lay hold of. That Mr. Ransome was found was certain, if on no better evidence than the letters I was shortly to deliver. I might have known what to suspect, had the discovery of the man been based on no better proof than mere assertion. Everything was so probable as to defy misgiving. So trifling a matter as Mr. Ransome's objection to go to Copsford lest he should be hooted—a fear perfectly consistent with his insanity, his cowardice, and his sense of the wrong he had done his wife—was a corroborative detail as cogent as strong evidence could be.

I finished my dinner, and went upstairs to dress myself. When I descended, the fly was at the door, and the Colonel waited for me in the anteroom, with the four letters in his hands.

"You will lose no time in delivering these letters, and receiving answers, Miss Avory."

"I will be as quick as I possibly can, sir."

"Thank you. You had better take the

houses in the order in which I have placed the letters. They follow regularly, and the flyman can make one road of them."

"Very well, sir."

He opened the hall door and escorted me, bareheaded, to the fly. He saved me the trouble of directing the driver by giving him a list of the addresses, waved his hand, and off I started, mechanically running my fingers over the letters, and reading the names upon them.

The driver of the fly was a Peterham man, but he knew his road thoroughly. I should here mention that Peterham was a small town, about four miles from Gardenhurst, on the London road.

The first house we stopped at was The Vale, Sir Anthony Lauder's residence: a big building situated in a valley separated from Copsford by a hill. The house abutted on the highway, and was screened by trees growing in a row behind a wall liberally garnished with iron spikes.

I got out of the fly, rang the bell, and asked for Sir Anthony. He was at home. I was shown into a large, bleak room, with some smouldering coals in the grate, and

an austere and portentous parrot in an iron cage on a table. The parrot and I stared at each other for ten minutes, and then the bird called out in a loud voice, "Here he comes!" which was perfectly true, for the door opened, and in came Sir Anthony Lauder. He was a small, spare man, with a richly oiled brown wig, and a cast in the eye. He bowed and gesticulated with his hand, but seemed too cold to sit down. I handed him the letter that bore his address; whereupon he with very great elaboration of manner drew forth and put on a pair of gold-mounted spectacles, looking at me the while, and attentively scanning my dress, evidently being under the impression that I had called for money.

He read the letter through, and cried, "God bless me!" but perhaps imagining that there was a lack of magisterial dignity in the exclamation, he looked grave, reflected, and then said—

"You will please inform Colonel Kilmain that I shall have much pleasure in acceding to his request."

That was all I had to hear; and, making my bow, I quitted the house and drove to

Mr. Ledbury's residence. This was close to The Vale. Mr. Ledbury was not at home, but he was sure to return in three quarters of an hour. So, leaving word that my business was very pressing, and that I would return at half-past three, I drove to Mr. Skerlock's house, which he was in the act of leaving when I arrived there. I told him who I was, and gave him the letter. He led me into a snug little study, where a fire roared up the chimney, and where the furniture was so homely and pleasant that it was as agreeable and satisfactory an illustration of the old gentleman's character as his kindly face. The walls were gay with summer pictures, and the bookcases laden with volumes which touched the air with the dry aroma of calf and morocco.

Mr. Skerlock read the letter twice—I suppose the Colonel had made a less formal epistle of it to him—and then folding it up and putting it in his pocket, took a pinch of snuff, and exclaimed—

“I always said the man was a rascal. So, he is found at last! And the poor Colonel wants some of us to verify the villain, that

his daughter may be cleared? Of course I will attend; and I only wish he had asked me to present myself with a horsewhip. I would give a trifle for the privilege of flogging the rascal who has subjected a beautiful and innocent woman to a monstrous and unnatural suspicion."

I thanked him, and said that I knew the Colonel was very grateful for the interest he had taken in his daughter throughout this strange affair. I added, that had Mrs. Ransome only acted on his (Mr. Skerlock's) advice, she would have spared herself much of the humiliating scandal that had followed the accusations of her husband's mother.

"Yes," he answered; "she should have let the law take its course with regard to the robbery. She did herself an injury in refusing to instruct the Inspector. She knows now, I suppose, that the footman *did* steal the plate; and that Mr. Ransome was ignorant of the robbery?"

"I believe so," I replied. "But doubtless Colonel Kilmain will tell you the whole story. I have other visits to make, sir, and must not delay them."

He led me to the fly by the hand—an

old-fashioned piece of courtesy, but a very graceful one—and, as the Colonel had done, stood bareheaded in the cold, bowing to me as the horse trotted off.

I now went to Mr. Hastings's house, in Albion Square, where I was kept waiting in the passage whilst the servant took the letter upstairs. The reverend gentleman, a thin, pale young man, came down presently looking rather scared ; and taking it for granted that I knew what the letter was about, stammered that this was scarcely a matter in which he cared to be mixed up ; that he was fervently rejoiced to learn that the wanderer had been recovered, but that he almost wished the Colonel would depute some shrewder person than himself to undertake this delicate duty of verification.

"It is the Colonel's wish," I answered, "to substantiate the report of this discovery (which of course will go the rounds) by the testimony of a clergyman. He will, I am sure, be greatly disappointed if you decline to meet Mr. Ransome."

He read the letter over again, and after humming and hawing awhile said—

"The Colonel speaks of my bearing

witness in the interests both of humanity and justice. I must not close my eyes to that view; and you may therefore tell him that I will be at his house at the appointed hour."

Congratulating myself on this result, I re-entered the fly, and was driven back to Mr. Ledbury's house, where I waited twenty minutes before he came in. This gentleman was of the stern order of mortals, highly important in his manner, a very rigorous and unbending administrator of the laws of the country (as the magistrate's clerk found them), much disliked by everybody, and under the happy impression that he was universally venerated and beloved.

He looked at me very attentively after he had read the letter, and asked me who I was. I told him.

"Are you acquainted," he said, "with the nature of this communication?"

I replied that I was.

"Oh! and why am I wanted to identify a man who may identify himself by paying a flyman, and getting himself driven through the town?"

I answered that I thought the letter he

had in his hand answered that question; and added, that three gentlemen I (mentioned their names) had consented to attend at Gardenhurst.

“Oh, Sir Anthony is to be there, is he?” exclaimed Mr. Ledbury. “And Mr. Skerlock? Indeed! Well, ma’am, the town shall not say that I have failed in the duty I owe it, as one of its magistrates. You may present my compliments to Colonel Kilmain, and inform him that I shall call at his house at eight o’clock this evening. Mr. Ledbury’s compliments, ma’am; and you may add, if you like, that my attendance at that hour will cause me great personal inconvenience, but that, as a magistrate, I am always ready to sacrifice all social and commercial considerations to my public duties.”

I left the house, glad that my unpleasant mission was over, and particularly glad to get away from this highly important and intensely disagreeable public servant. All four errands had proved successful; and now that they were accomplished, and I was journeying homewards, I began to wonder whether, after all, the “meeting of

verification"—as I was disposed to call it—which the Colonel had commissioned me to bring about, was the wisest thing he could have done. No doubt the evidence of these four men would utterly put an end to the suspicion that hung over Mrs. Ransome; but would it kill the prejudice? Would it not be thought a violent remedy? Would not people say that the Colonel should have considered his word enough? That his extreme efforts to vindicate his daughter in the absence of any better proofs of her guilt than mere popular gossip, were derogatory to his dignity as a gentleman—and so forth?

I had considered his policy sound at the first blush: but now, when I reflected that the missing man was found, I was strongly disposed to believe that the Colonel's most dignified course would have been (secure as he knew his daughter's reputation now to be) to leave the scandalmongers to find out their own falsehoods, and to commit to time the task of bringing about the revulsion of feeling which invariably takes an exaggerated form when the public themselves find out their mistakes. He might then be

sure of the sympathy he now sought for his daughter. But to extort a confession of error from people was not the way to go to work if he wished to maintain the dignity of his child.

These reflections occupied me during my return to Gardenhurst. The Colonel had evidently been waiting for me ; for on the fly stopping, he himself opened the door, and eagerly asked me what answers I brought.

"All four will be here, sir, at the hour you named."

"Then you have done your work well, Miss Ivory ; and I am heartily obliged to you," he said. "Don't let me keep you standing here. It is bitterly cold. Come into the dining-room. My daughter is as anxious as I am to hear what these gentlemen said."

He led the way ; but Mrs. Ransome was not in the room. He did not notice her absence ; and as though he had utterly forgotten his remark about her anxiety, began to ply me with questions.

First of all, what did Sir Anthony say ? and after I had told him, then what did Mr. Ledbury say ? and afterwards he must hear

of the reception of his letter by Mr. Hastings. And finally, what did Mr. Skerlock say?

He listened with an air of keen anxiety to the account I gave him of my four visits, interrupting me with numerous suggestions ; such as, did Sir Anthony question me about Maddox ? Did Mr. Ledbury appear at all doubting after reading the letter ? Was I sure that bashfulness or nervousness *only* was the reason for Mr. Hastings's disinclination to attend the meeting, and not a dislike of Mrs. Ransome or a distrust of his (the Colonel's) object ?

By many of these questions he pre-supposed on my part a very wonderful capacity for reading secret thoughts. I answered him as well as I could ; but even after the story of my visits had been told and told again, he was still holding on, so to speak, to the skirts of it, begging me once more to describe Sir Anthony's manner when he read the letter, and to try to remember if Mr. Ledbury had said anything more than what I had repeated, and looking eagerly at me as he spoke, and almost oppressing me with his nervous and feverish anxiety.

Presently he said—

“This is a painful ordeal for my poor girl to go through. I don’t think I shall allow her to be present. She ought never to see her husband again ; and least of all, under such circumstances as these, when the man means to inform the witnesses that he refuses to live with his wife.”

“I don’t think Mrs. Ransome ought to be present, sir.”

“So I say. But if I seem to hesitate it is because I believe that all considerations should be sacrificed to the end I have in view—that of clearing her name. The question is, would her presence give this meeting a more authentic character ?”

“I don’t see how it could, sir. The gentlemen you have invited will be able to satisfy themselves. Mrs. Ransome’s being by and looking on will not make her husband more her husband than he is.”

“You think so ? Put yourself in the place of one of the witnesses. Would you feel better satisfied if Mrs. Ransome were in the room ?”

“I don’t quite understand, sir,” I an-

swered, remarking that he hesitated to give full expression to his thoughts.

"I ask you to imagine yourself a witness ; and I wish to know what course I can adopt so as best to convince you that the reports which have been circulated are utterly false."

"You produce the man who is reported to have been murdered. What better proof of Mrs. Ransome's innocence could I wish, sir ?"

"And Mrs. Ransome's presence in the room would not add weight to your conclusions ?"

"Not in the least. My ears and eyes would not deceive me."

He drew a deep breath and exclaimed, "That decides me. I am glad to be able to spare my daughter this trial." He added, after a short silence, "The meeting will take place in the drawing-room. Some refreshments will be served to the gentlemen when Mr. Ransome is gone. I wish for an excuse to detain them in order to hear what they may have to say."

VII.

The afternoon passed. It was the season when the night falls early. At five o'clock I was sewing in my room by lamplight. Outside there was a high wind and a bleak grey sky ; for an hour the snow had fallen heavily ; but that was past, and what glimpse of the grounds I could catch showed them lying white and spectral in the gloom.

The dinner went upstairs at the usual hour, but was soon despatched, and some time before seven the dessert was removed. The cook, who had received very indefinite intelligence of what was going forward from the housemaid, came and asked me if it were true that Mr. Ransome was coming to the house that night? I told her it was true. Was it possible, she wanted to know, that Mrs. Ransome was going to live with that wretch of a man again, after his deserting her, and making people think that she had murdered him? I replied, that he was coming merely to show himself to a few persons, and that he was not likely to be in the house above half an hour.

"Well to be sure!" she exclaimed.
"What a singular idea! After seeing his wife he means to go away again?"

"Yes, for good."

"Oh dear!" she cried. "I wish I was Mrs. Ransome, just for five minutes! Wouldn't I give him something as 'ud make him remember me to his dying day!"

"Why, would you scratch him?" I asked, laughing.

"Ah, that I would!" she answered.
"I'd give him a dose as would make him swear doctor's physic were nothing to it. An idle, good-for-nothing lout! to run away from his wife, and to bring the voice of scandal upon her, and then to turn up and coolly call to say he wasn't comfortable, and didn't mean to live with her again! I'd give it him if I was his wife! What time is he coming here?"

"At eight."

"Do you think it 'ud gratify missis if I was to stand behind the door and give him a push as he goes out?" she asked, gazing at me earnestly.

"That wouldn't do at all."

"You think not? I'm the woman to do

it, I tell yer, Miss. Let the word be spoke, and I'd knock his hat off."

I assured her that her mistress stood in no need of such demonstrative sympathy, and got rid of her by saying that I was too nervous to talk ; which was true enough.

Indeed, it was drawing near the hour when the visitors were to arrive ; and, to say nothing of the fact that this was the culminating point of a mystery that had perplexed us for months past, I had fears that some sort of disagreeable and painful scene must take place before the meeting concluded.

It once entered my mind to wonder why the Colonel did not ask me to join the other witnesses ; but I reflected that my testimony might not be held as impartial, and my presence therefore would be useless. All the same, I would have given a good deal for the privilege of being in the room. In any case the scene was bound to be a curious one. Moreover, I had a longing to hear what Mr. Ransome would say. One thing was certain ; those who were assembled would see that he was mad. No one but a madman would, in his place, enter the

house. It became a question whether the Colonel was acting humanely, now that he had caught Mr. Ransome, in letting him go again. A man who could act as this madman had acted, stood, in sober earnest, in very great need of control. But it was impossible for me to conceive the many reasons, outside the essential reason with which I was acquainted, which the Colonel might have in choosing the course he was adopting.

It was now ten minutes to eight. The night outside was quite black. I went upstairs, and seeing the drawing-room door open, peeped in. The room was empty. A small lamp stood on the table, and there was a shade over it which threw the upper part of the room and the circumference of the walls, half-way down from the ceiling, into gloom. I wondered if the meeting was to take place in that light. If so, such of the spectators as were short-sighted would have a hard job to see each other's faces.

No sound came from the room opposite ; but I heard the creak of boots pacing the carpet restlessly. I noticed now, what I

had not noticed before, that the hall-lamp burned dimly. Thinking this should be remedied, I drew a hall-chair under it, and stood up to see if the wick had been trimmed. The sound of the chair dragged along the floor brought the Colonel out.

"What are you doing, Miss Ivory?" he exclaimed.

"I am looking to this lamp, sir, which burns badly."

"It may want more oil," he said, and stood watching me a moment or two; and then withdrew. But he put out his head again, saying, "Let Sarah answer the door when the bell rings."

"Yes, sir."

I turned the wick up, and the lamp burned brightly; which done, I went downstairs.

It was three minutes to eight by my clock when the hall-bell rang. I called to Sarah, who hurried to the door. Wondering if this were Mr. Ransome, I listened at the foot of the staircase, hoping to hear his voice. There was the tread of footsteps, and I heard the Colonel say strongly and loudly, "This way, if you please," and they walked

towards the drawing-room. Sarah came downstairs and whispered, "It's Mr. Ransome."

"Are you sure?" I exclaimed, my heart beating in the absurdest way.

"Yes, Miss; he gave me his name: but master came out and took him to the drawing-room."

"Is he changed?" I asked; but remembering that the girl had never seen him I said, "How does he look?"

"Why, he's very handsome; and has a black moustache and a high forehead like a poet. I don't know what colour his eyes are; they look black—but the light in the hall is so bad that I couldn't see him well."

"Why, I just turned the wick up," I said. "There's oil enough to burn all night. Go and turn it up again. The other gentlemen who are coming won't be able to find their way."

She was running off when the bell pealed again; and scarcely was the visitor admitted when the bell rang a third time; and by a few minutes after eight the four invited gentlemen were assembled in the drawing-room. Every time the housemaid came

downstairs, the cook questioned her eagerly ; and I will own to leaving my door open expressly that I might hear what the girl said. By this means I learnt that Sir Anthony and Mr. Ledbury had come together ; and that the last to arrive was Mr. Hastings, who hung back when the door was opened and looked as if he would have liked to run away.

Upstairs all was quite silent. Mrs. Ransome had gone to her bedroom, so the housemaid had told me, where a fire had been lighted an hour or two before. I concluded that it was hardly possible Mr. Ransome would remain any length of time, and I was mastered by an irresistible curiosity to see him—and not only him, but the whole formal scene. How was this to be done ? I had no fear that the Colonel would be displeased by my curiosity ; on the contrary, I was sure he would think it extremely reasonable, and invite me himself to see Mr. Ransome if it could be managed without my appearing among the gentlemen.

A thought struck me. It was twenty chances to one if the curtains to the windows

which looked on to the terrace were drawn. I might without being seen obtain a good view of the interior of the room from behind one of the pillars ; and scarcely had the idea presented itself when I was creeping softly upstairs.

The safest mode of gaining the grounds was by the house-door facing the avenue. After the warmth of my room the hall struck bitterly cold. It would never do to enter the raw night air without being well protected ; so I stole upstairs for my thick waterproof cloak, noticing as I passed the dimness of the hall-lamp and wondering for what reason the flame was kept so low.

Enveloped in my cloak, the well-lined hood of which was over my head, I returned swiftly and on tiptoe to the hall, reached the house-door, and adjusting the latch to prevent it from locking me out, plunged up to my ankles into the snow which had been driven by the wind in heaps around the walls. Overhead it was pitch dark ; but the reflection of the snow served to guide my steps. The wind roared dismally among the trees, and I was so much dismayed by the sound of it, and the piercing cold and

the intense gloom, that I was within an ace of returning. But my ardent curiosity prevailed ; and walking as swiftly as I might, sometimes stumbling against a bush from which the wind had shaken the snow and which rose black and invisible in my path, and sometimes tripping over the box, I passed around the house and reached the terrace.

The curtains in the windows fronting the grounds were drawn ; the damask that draped the dining-room windows shone warm and red with the quivering fireplay behind ; but the velvet curtains of the drawing-room effectually obscured every ray of light. Just as I had anticipated, however, the curtains of the window overlooking the terrace were not drawn. There was a clear space of glass between each. I drew behind one of the pillars and looked into the room.

The light shed by the lamp was feeble ; but some one would seem to have just stirred the fire ; for the flames streamed brightly and produced the strangest effects of dark shadows and red brilliance in the room and on those assembled there. The four guests

sat in a group on the right-hand side of the table ; their faces were towards the fire and the light of the lamp shone upon them. The Colonel stood by the side of Sir Anthony Lauder, with his arms folded on his breast, his head lowered, his brows contracted. Exactly facing these men, his back to the fire, and his head thrown defiantly backwards, stood Mr. Ransome. One hand was thrust into his trousers' pocket, the other negligently played with his watch-chain. His attitude was perfectly easy ; but owing to his head being in the gloom which the shade over the lamp threw upon the upper portion of the room, it was impossible for me to clearly discern his face. I looked at him very attentively. So far as I could make out, the six months had wrought no change in him. But there was something not only in his attitude, but in the resolute gaze which he fixed on Mr. Skerlock who was at that moment addressing him, which impressed me in a very peculiar manner. Owing to the distance at which I had posted myself from the window I could not hear a word that was spoken within ; there was nothing then to withdraw my attention

from the central figure. The longer I looked the more confused and odd became the feelings which the sight of him aroused in me. That I was actually beholding Mr. Ransome I never doubted ; all the signs by which I might know him were there—the moustache growing low on the upper-lip ; the black eyes ; the high forehead ; the unparted hair ; the long jawbones ; the slim figure. And yet had the conviction possessed me that this man was not Mr. Ransome, I believe that my emotions would not have been other than they were. His imperturbable air startled me. That at least was a new characteristic. My memory brought him before me as dubious, nervous, shrinking, with convulsive movements of hands and feet, with sudden upliftings of the brows, with quick elusive glances. He had acquired a new kind of courage certainly to enable him to support with an ease, that any man might have envied, the steadfast and hostile regard that was fixed upon him.

Mr. Skerlock was growing excited, and the murmur of his voice reached me through the closed windows. Sir Anthony nodded portentously, and from time to

time Mr. Ledbury whispered Mr. Hastings, who sat with his hands twisted over his thin knee.

By this time I was nearly frozen ; moreover, I feared that Mr. Ransome might leave the room at any moment, and so cause the hall door to be shut, which would prevent me from entering the house without ringing the bell—a notion I did not relish, because though I fully intended to tell Colonel Kilmain that I had taken a peep through the window at Mr. Ransome, I disliked the idea of the servant, who admitted me, guessing that I had been spying.

I was about to turn away, when I was suddenly brought to a dead stand by a movement at the end of the terrace, where the alcove was. My eyes were now used to the darkness, and turning them in the direction of the sound, I perceived the outline of a man standing close against the wall.

I was so horribly frightened, that my exclamation of “ Who’s there ? ” was scarcely better than a gasp.

“ It’s me, Miss,” said a man’s voice,

which I did not recognise ; and a figure stalked out, touching his cap. "I'm Poole, Miss," he continued. "I'm up to no harm ; I only wanted to see Mr. Ransome, as everybody said was murdered."

"Oh !" I exclaimed ; and that was all. In another moment I was gliding round the house, with my heart beating from the recent shock, as though I had barely escaped some dreadful danger. I pushed open the hall door, and closed it softly, then hastily removing my cloak, I threw it over my arm, and went downstairs.

I was just in time ; another minute and I must have met Mr. Ransome at the door, for hardly was I in my room when I heard Colonel Kilmain's voice, and the footsteps of two persons passing to the door by which I had entered. Shortly after this the Colonel returned. He walked quickly, and the hum of voices, that had flowed into the hall, was abruptly silenced as the Colonel closed the drawing-room door after him.

The bell rang, and some refreshments, in the shape of spirits, wine, cake, &c., were taken upstairs. The voices came loud and eager through the door as the housemaid

passed into the room. I strained my ears to catch what was said, being very curious to know if there was any disagreement among them respecting the identity of Mr. Ransome ; but not a word was distinct.

I calculated that altogether, Mr. Ransome had not remained longer than fifteen minutes in the house.

By this time my pulse was beating quietly enough. The fright that the man Poole had given me was passed ; and I regretted now that I had been too cowardly to ask him what he meant by lurking about the drawing-room windows at eight o'clock at night, when he was supposed to leave off work at dusk—that was, about four o'clock. However, the *rencontre* was scarcely worth making a mystery of. A little reflection found me quite willing to believe his statement, that he was there merely to see Mr. Ransome. I had been there for the same purpose, and what was true of me should be true of him.

At nine o'clock either Mr. Ledbury's or Sir Anthony's carriage drove up. As all four gentlemen were going the same road, here was a good opportunity for such of

them as would have to walk the distance to get a ride home. They all left the drawing-room at once; and I heard the Colonel thank them for their attendance.

"Your appeal was in good taste, and highly reasonable," a voice exclaimed. To which another replied, "I fancy I could tame his obstinacy were the leisure given me." The Colonel cried, "Hush! gentlemen; the kitchen is under you!"

They were some time putting on their coats, and then they all passed out of the hall to the door, where the carriage had drawn up.

In a few moments the Colonel returned; he hesitated awhile in the hall, and then called my name softly. Had my door been closed I should not have heard him. I found him standing near the drawing-room door. He was pressing his handkerchief to his head, and though his face was deadly pale, a triumphant smile hovered about his mouth.

"Will you go and tell Mrs. Ransome I am alone, Miss Ivory?"

I knocked at her bedroom door. She leaned with her elbow upon the toilet-table.

The room was lighted only by the fire, which had burned into a red core, and threw out a red glow. Her face was reflected in the looking-glass, and both the reality and the counterfeit were like ghostly countenances staring at each other. I gave her the Colonel's message, and she instantly started up, and came to the door. I followed her downstairs, neither of us speaking a word; and I was making for the kitchen staircase, when the Colonel called to me.

When I entered the drawing-room he shut the door, and placed the lamp on the mantelpiece. Mrs. Ransome glanced at me, and I caught her make a slight impatient gesture to her father, evidently objecting to my presence. He took no notice. I could not very well take a hint of this kind, or I should have left the room. She went close to the fire with a shiver, and seated herself on a low chair, with her eyes on her father.

All this scarcely took a minute; then the Colonel, leaning with his back against the mantelpiece, said—

“Phœbe, the gentlemen are perfectly satisfied. Mr. Skerlock wished me to send

for you that he might tell you, in the name of those assembled, how deeply they deplored the anxiety that has been caused you by your mother-in-law's accusation. But I would not allow you to be called. Mr. Ledbury applauded my reasons, and left it to me to express their sympathy."

"I should not have come had I been called," said Mrs. Ransome.

"No, of course not; because you are determined not to meet your husband again, and you have a good reason for being resolute," he exclaimed, speaking *at* me, though he addressed his daughter. "But that was not my motive. I considered your dignity and your feelings."

She was silent.

This silence struck me as very curious. It was thoroughly to be expected that she would ply her father with questions, and show herself excited in a high degree by the strange scene that had just been concluded. Did my presence act as a restraint? I certainly could not understand why the Colonel should want a stranger like me in the room. Much, surely, he had to tell his daughter which he would not speak before me.

"Mr. Ransome behaved well, I must do him that justice," he said. "He was cool and collected, with no hint of madness in one of his looks or remarks. When he was gone, Mr. Hastings wondered how people could think him mad; but Mr. Skerlock answered, that madmen were not always foaming at the mouth; the most dangerous among them are those who hide their madness under a perfect disguise of sanity, because then they always throw you off your guard."

Mrs. Ransome still kept silence. He fixed his eyes on me after he had spoken, which obliged me to answer—

"That's no doubt true, sir."

"He stood here," he went on, planting himself in the middle of the hearth rug, "and we were seated where you are, Miss Avory. There was an embarrassing silence when we were all assembled, and I had closed the door. I broke it by thanking the gentlemen for their attendance, and by explaining my reasons for inviting them to this house. I then pointed to Mr. Ransome, and said, 'There stands the man, gentlemen, who has been reported mur-

dered, and whose death has been attributed by false and malicious tongues to my daughter. The evidence of your own eyes will now enable you to convict the originator of this report, either as a wilful and cruel liar, or as having been mad at the time of harbouring the suspicion to which she gave tongue.' Mr. Skerlock at once said, 'I did not require to see Mr. Ransome to know that your daughter was an injured and guiltless lady. I believe I shall convey the sentiments of my companions when I express our deep concern that the voice of scandal should have placed you and yours in this painful position.' Upon this Mr. Ransome said, 'Colonel Kilmain has explained my motive for coming here. My domestic affairs make no portion of the business of this meeting. I must merely inform you that I left my wife because I was not happy with her, and that nothing but a wish that justice should be done her could have induced me to enter this house again. I believe,' he said, addressing me, 'that you have no further need of my presence.' I would have conducted him out of the house there and then ; but Mr. Hastings

took it into his head to offer him a short lecture on his duty as a husband. And then Mr. Skerlock asked permission to speak, and told him that if he had one spark of honour left in his composition, he would not leave Copsford until he had convincingly proved to the people that they had committed an atrocious act of injustice in crediting his mother's accusation against his wife. Sir Anthony declared that it was one of the cruellest wrongs that had ever come under his notice; and Mr. Ledbury assured us in a loud emphatic voice, that far smaller sins than his had been visited with very heavy punishments. The moment they were silent, Mr. Ransome bowed and walked out of the room."

Though it was supposed that he was addressing his daughter, the whole of this story was delivered point blank to me. I listened with great attention, but could not rid myself of a haunting sense that there was something strange and startling hidden behind all this, and that, let the secret be what it would, it was known to Mrs. Ransome. Her undissembled indifference was thoroughly bewildering. She asked no

questions ; she never raised her eyes ; she hardly appeared to pay attention to what her father said. Nor was *his* manner a whit more satisfactory. His story had flowed glibly indeed ; but there was something forced and unreal in his voice—something constrained and difficult in his bearing—something that irresistibly persuaded me that in what he was saying and doing he was not true to himself. But no conceivable reason why this should be entered my head. Every instinct in me felt the mystery ; yet my judgment, in defiance of intuition, obliged me to witness the whole affair as real, plain, and straightforward.

I could see that his daughter's lifeless manner made him uneasy, for he glanced at her repeatedly and impatiently ; but she would not look up.

A perfect silence followed the conclusion of his narrative, and he fell back in his former place against the mantelpiece.

Presently I said—

“ I saw Mr. Ransome, sir, and, considering the peculiar position he was placed in, it struck me that his bearing (I did not hear him speak) was very different from

what I should have expected it to be seven months ago."

When I said this, Mrs. Ransome looked up sharply, and stared at me.

"Saw him!" exclaimed the Colonel, in a low voice. "Where? you were not in this room."

"I saw him from that window," I answered, pointing. They both turned their heads quickly in the direction. "I was curious to see if he was at all changed."

Mrs. Ransome watched me with a frown.

"When was that? how long were you there? I did not see you," said the Colonel, speaking quickly, and with an air of suppressed excitement.

"I did not wish to be seen, sir. I stood behind one of the pillars."

It was impossible for me to assume that I had done wrong, and so I offered no defence. They both looked at me intently, but with different expressions. There was dark anger in Mrs. Ransome's face; in the Colonel's, an alarm that made his forced smile painful.

"What took you to the window, Miss Ivory?" demanded Mrs. Ransome, impe-

riously. "Your presence was not wanted, or my father would have invited you to join the others."

"Miss Ivory had a perfect right to look at Mr. Ransome if she chose," exclaimed the Colonel, rebuking his daughter with a wave of the hand.

"The interest I have taken in this affair throughout is the only excuse I can offer," I replied. "Had I thought the action would have incurred your displeasure, I would not have committed it."

"Miss Ivory, there is not the least need to apologize," said the Colonel. "Of course you were right to look at the man. Why did I bring him here but that he might be seen? I wish the servants had joined you. The greater the number of witnesses the better."

"I was not alone, sir. There was another spectator."

"Who?" he demanded, the smile leaving his face in a flash.

"The under-gardener, Poole."

"Poole! at such an hour!"

"He was hiding when I saw him. I was too frightened, not knowing who he

was in the dark, to stop and question him."

He walked to the window, opened it, and called "Poole!" He stared into the blackness, came back, seized the lamp, and went into the terrace. The cold air rushing through the open window drove Mrs. Ransome closer to the fire. She hugged herself, and shuddered.

"I don't suppose he is there now, sir," I called out.

"I don't see him," he answered, re-entering the room, and closing the window. "Of all creatures what should Poole do in the terrace at such an hour? He leaves the grounds at four, doesn't he?"

"I believe so. I suppose he was attracted by the same motive that drew me from my warm room into the snow—curiosity. Indeed he admitted as much."

"No doubt!" he exclaimed, with a loud, violent laugh. "So that makes six witnesses, instead of four. Better if the number were sixty. Phœbe, why do you look so sulky?"

"I am not sulky, papa," she answered, with a faint smile that quickly vanished when she turned her eyes down again.

"You found Mr. Ransome changed, you say, Miss Ivory?" He dropped his head on one side to catch my answer.

"There was a composure in his manner which seemed to me unlike what I can remember of him."

"You said, I think, that you did not catch his voice?"

"No, sir."

"Then you can scarcely assume any change; for how are you to know that the manner and attitude he adopted were not meant to correspond with his language?"

"I don't think he spoke during the time I watched him."

"Papa, you have said he was defiant," exclaimed Mrs. Ransome, impatiently.

"He was defiant. When he stated his intention of never again returning to this house, he looked boldly at us, as if he suspected his assertion would provoke indignation. You might have seen him at that moment, Miss Ivory."

"Very likely, sir."

"But still," he continued, half turning away from me whilst he chafed his hands before the fire, "there is a change for the

better in the man's bearing. He is not the nervous, jerky, furtive being he used to be. I noticed this in London. He looks one steadily in the face, and speaks temperately. Perhaps his madness is leaving him, or," he added, looking at me over his shoulder with a smile, "the cunning of madness has increased, and he adopts this collected manner that he may defy me to prove him mad, should I ever take it into my head to lock him up in a lunatic asylum."

"I am very glad it is all over, sir," I exclaimed, rising; for it was nearly ten o'clock, and I had several things to do before going to bed.

"Yes," he answered, looking at me strangely, and passing his hand over his forehead; "but it has been a bad business—a wretched, miserable business from the beginning."

"For me, papa," said Mrs. Ransome.

"And for me!" he cried, with a sudden passion; "and even for her," pointing to me, "and every member of this household. Has it not been thought that that wretched man has been murdered here—in this very

house? All who live here have had their share of the suspicion that has hung like a cloud over the place, depend upon it. What would I not give to find Maddox?"

"Happily, sir," I said, "there is no mystery about him. The discovery of Mr. Ransome reduces the footman to a mere robber."

He glanced at me, and then breathed quickly, like one who hastily catches himself up in the act of speaking. Finding that he remained silent, I moved towards the door, lingering a moment or two in case either of them had more to say, and then left the room.

So now, then, the mystery was ended; and from this night Mrs. Ransome was freed from the horrible suspicion that had been fastened upon her more than half a year ago.

But *was* the mystery ended? There was that in me which assured me it was only just begun; and the strange fancy became a haunting conviction, in spite of every reason I could think of to prove it absurd.

I quitted the drawing-room possessed

with a peculiar feeling of disappointment ; this I could account for. I had certainly expected to find both the Colonel and Mrs. Ransome—and especially the latter—much more greatly excited than they had shown themselves. When I considered the nature of the accusation that had been disproved ; the sense of security and triumph that must inspire both father and daughter in knowing that the detestable and dishonourable lie which had been started by old Mrs. Ransome was forced back in the throats of those who had repeated and believed it, I was amazed to reflect upon the forced, unsatisfactory, and uneasy air of the Colonel, indicative of anything but gladness, and the incomprehensible listlessness and reserve of his daughter. But a few days ago both of them would have cheerfully surrendered ten years of their lives to have been able to lay their hands upon Mr. Ransome ; and now he was found, and now men of credit and honour had beheld him, and would, of their own accord, spread the news, and eagerly vindicate Mrs. Ransome's character, and yet they had both struck me as being as little satisfied with the sequel of this

extraordinary affair as if the missing man had never been discovered.

I was greatly puzzled. That there was something wrong in all this, something hidden, something mysterious, I was as sure as that I breathed. Three foundations I had for this notion: the behaviour of the Colonel; the indifference of Mrs. Ransome; the anxiety the Colonel had exhibited in his manner to me, in his having summoned me to the drawing-room, and thus placing me on the same level with his daughter as an interested party in the business. There was something more than courtesy in this; there was design in it, that had no reference to politeness.

And there was even a fourth matter, that somehow served to complicate my private bewilderment: I mean the presence of the under-gardener, Poole, in the terrace. I fancied I had explained this satisfactorily when I assumed, on his own declaration, that he had been drawn there by curiosity. But when I thought over it, I could not bring myself to believe that mere curiosity only had tempted a man, after a day's work, to leave his fireside, plunge into the snow,

and hang about the terrace, with the risk of being discharged should he be caught.

Was he in any way concerned in Mr. Ransome's disappearance or recovery? This seemed as absurd as the numberless other questions I was now incessantly putting to myself. One thing, at all events, I can safely aver: that when I went to bed that night my mind was in a greater state of mystification than ever it had been throughout the whole period of Mr. Ransome's disappearance, dating from the moment when I had first discovered his absence, up to this time of his being proved alive.

VIII.

I come now to what I always recal as the strangest portion of the story I am relating; but before I enter upon it I must first prepare the way by a brief account of the events of the fortnight that preceded the incident I refer to.

I had very confidently expected, now that Mrs. Ransome's life had been purified from the suspicion that darkened it, that the

Colonel would shut up his house, and take his daughter away ; and considering the nature of the troubles they had escaped, I was pretty sure, when once they were away, that they would never return.

But I very soon discovered that it was not the Colonel's intention to leave Gardenhurst. Indeed, he indirectly implied as much, but expressed no reason for abandoning the idea he had on several occasions vehemently threatened to carry out. I found, however, nothing particularly unreasonable in his remaining in his old home. In one sense he and his daughter could scarcely have lived a more retired life had they banished themselves to some continental solitude. On selfish grounds I was glad that they kept where they were : my duties were light, my salary liberal, and in spite of the change that had come over Mrs. Ransome since the time when her mother-in-law had first excited suspicion against her, I was more comfortable at Gardenhurst than ever I had been in any former situation, and could scarcely doubt that any change which befel me must be for the worse.

Among other things, which did not

strike me so forcibly then as they did later on, when I was able to piece them into a whole and gather their import fully, was an alteration in the Colonel's manner to me, quite distinct enough to make itself felt, though by no means so obtrusive as to occasion speculation. There was less cordiality and more elaboration in his politeness. The ease that had made his courtesy especially grateful and in no sense embarrassing was missing; his behaviour was formal and anxious. If ever I had occasion to wait upon him, he thanked me for my services as he might an equal. When we met on the stairs or in the hall, he made way for me studiously, and had always a gravely courteous remark to offer. There was even, at times, a diffidence in his accost. But on the subject of Mr. Ransome he was silent. Often as we would speak together—of the house, of his daughter's health, of the servants, of my duties, of any such matters—not once, during the interval this part of the story is now occupying, did the smallest reference to his son-in-law escape him.

I coupled this strange silence with the

various odd fancies that possessed me, and made them by the union more bewildering yet. There was no reason that I could imagine why he should cease to honour me with the confidence he had never before withheld. It was beyond question that his mind was very full of the subject. His daughter's relations with her husband were as unsatisfactory as they could well be. Mr. Ransome could return at any moment and insist upon living in the house if it so pleased him. No law as yet had sundered them. She was still as absolutely his wife as ever she had been; but their union was now hampered by the most delicate and distressing conditions. The Colonel was bound to feel her position keenly. The freedom with which he had heretofore spoken to me on matters equally confidential with this, made it natural to suppose that he would sometimes express his thoughts about her to me. But the topic never formed any feature of our conversations. And further, if the discovery of Mr. Ransome had promised to restore peace of mind to the Colonel, the hope so raised was disappointed; for his care and anxiety were assuredly greater now

than ever they had been ; and his difficult assumption of a placid exterior only served to exaggerate the emotions it was designed to conceal.

Of Mrs. Ransome I saw but little. The housemaid usually brought me her instructions ; and all her migrations were from the bedroom to the dining-room. But the little I *did* see showed me a woman cold, stony, and sullen—lifeless in her abnormal inactivity, unsmiling, silent, inattentive even to the meaning of her own remarks. The change was scarcely credible. The blood seemed to have turned to ice in her veins ; the light was quenched in her eyes ; her hands were so thin and white that thinner and whiter they would not be when they were composed in her coffin. Reading appeared her only occupation ; but if I might judge by the little I beheld, I would declare that I never found her with a book in her hand of which she could have told me the name.

If the spirit of her mother-in-law had felt its revenge balked by the discovery of Mr. Ransome, it might now hold itself satisfied. Here was but the pale, nerveless shadow of

a woman melancholy as death where had been a beautiful imperious creature, so graceful as to gladden the eye with the lightest movement of her handsome shape, so spirited and radiant even with the burden of a brutal husband upon her, as to create an atmosphere of light and music around her by the movement of her eyes and by the sound of her voice.

What effect the discovery of Mr. Ransome had had upon the popular prejudice against the wife, I never could learn from the Colonel. The weather was very inclement, and in that fortnight I don't think I went to Copsford more than twice, and on neither occasion did I glean any particulars as to what the people were saying of the Ransomes. However, the cook knew a good number of persons in the town, and the housemaid also had her friends ; and from one and the other of them I picked up scraps of information which showed me that the town was very talkative about her innocence, and that Mr. Ransome was generally considered a brute.

However, I did not take much interest in what the neighbours thought, and hoped

that the reason of the Colonel's silence was contempt of public opinion now that his daughter's name was cleansed. I could form some idea of the general feeling by a letter that appeared in the local paper which was published every Saturday; this letter was printed in the number issued on the same week in which the meeting had been held at Gardenhurst. One of the tradesmen brought the paper to the house and lent it to the cook. The letter was aimed at "Justitia," the writer of the communication to which the Colonel had called my attention some time before. It was scornful, but not particularly witty. It spoke of the wrong that had been done to an innocent lady; it praised the father's manly efforts to vindicate his child from the diabolical accusations of a certain elderly and undoubtedly mad lady lately deceased; and it exhorted the people of Copsford to be a little more cautious for the future in harbouring suspicions on the testimony of insane persons, and wound up by congratulating the magistrates on the judgment and spirit they had shown in refusing to allow a guiltless lady to be arraigned before

them. The editor made this letter the text of a leading article in which he bullied the Inspector for his bovine zeal, and asked with many notes of interrogation and exclamation "what man can consider himself safe in a country where such outrages are sanctioned by the law ?"

These were straws that showed which way the wind was blowing. No doubt the Colonel and his daughter read the article and the letter, but they did not advert to them in my presence.

And yet in this fortnight only two persons called at the house—Mr. Hastings and Mr. Skerlock. Mr. Hastings merely left his card ; Mr. Skerlock called twice, the first time with his wife.

I knew little of what went on upstairs, what the Colonel did and talked about, what Mrs. Ransome thought. I had been quietly and courteously shut out from the sphere of those interests in which I had taken part, and was now the complete housekeeper with nothing to attend to but my duties. But I was not allowed to feel this as a slight. Indeed, this gentle exclusion was reasonable and proper ; for now the trouble was over ;

the memory was a bitter one ; and its disposal left them no excuse to raise me again to the flattering level I had held while the matter was mysterious and the trouble of it heavy and harassing.

Exactly a fortnight had elapsed since the meeting between Mr. Ransome and the witnesses had been held. Winter had set in with great severity. There was no snow, but the earth had been frozen into black iron by the bitter north wind. A leaden sky had prevailed for some days, giving an indescribable aspect of forlornness to the naked trees and the dead, leafless desolation of the country round. The birds moped upon the skeleton branches, and the wind plained about the house like the voice of a grieving spirit. The freezing air penetrated to the bones ; but for days I had not quitted the house ; the want of exercise had caused me to toss wakefully on my bed ; and, having an hour to spare, I enveloped myself in my thick cloak and warm gloves and went for a walk in the grounds.

The hills stood livid and austere upon the land, and in the valleys there was the

gloom almost of twilight. Here and there upon the rugged fields lay patches of snow—remnants of the fall that many days before had blanched the country for miles around. The grass crackled crisply under my feet as if each blade were an icicle.

I turned off to the right and walked towards the kitchen gardens, intending to take the whole circuit of the grounds. This was practicable, owing to the path which ran close alongside the hedges, and which the gardeners kept pretty free of the nettles and brambles and weeds that grew on the bankside.

I caught sight of Poole, digging, some distance off. He turned his head, cased in a hairy cap, to look at me, then planted his spade afresh and put his foot upon it. My thoughts went back to that night when I had encountered him in the terrace. I eyed him curiously, for in some instinctive manner which I could not in the smallest degree understand or account for, I associated him with the long disappearance of Mr. Ransome.

I walked on briskly, going down the hill. How bleak and bitter was the wind! but

my rapid pace circulated my blood, and I enjoyed the exhilarating, wholesome warmth of quick exercise. Some crows looking larger than hens, frightened by my footsteps, rose from behind the hedge, and startled me with their abrupt and noisy soaring.

I reached the bottom of the grounds and pursued the path that led directly to the trees. Their dark straight trunks, close against each other, looked the ribs of many wrecked ships; high among their topmost boughs the rooks' nests swung tattered and black. Under them the shadows lay dark and heavy, and repellant; one strip of sunshine would have made the scene exquisitely picturesque, for the fibrous outlines were full of grace, and there would have been softness and colour in the gloom had there been the broken illumination of sunlight to contrast it with. But the lead-coloured sky made the aspect of the trees ghastly, and the wind awoke weird sounds among them.

I was turning to the left to take a cut across the grounds, when I heard the sounds of footsteps trampling and crunching the dead leaves, and a man came running out

from among the trees. He was the upper-gardener, named Walters, an elderly man who had worked on the estate, so he had told me, all his life. His face was now deadly pale, his eyes were wide open, and he wore an expression of intense horror and fear. As he ran, his head struck against a bough which tore his cap off; he did not stop to recover it, but was hastening onwards when he caught sight of me; on which he stopped, motioning with one hand and wiping his forehead with his sleeve, unable to speak.

Astounded by his extraordinary behaviour, I went up to him and asked him what was the matter. He tried to speak, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and after gasping out some utterly inaudible sentences, he pointed to the trees, and clasped his hands over his breast, breathing heavily.

I strained my eyes in the direction he indicated, but could see nothing to account for his terror. Not until I had repeated my question thrice and given him time to collect himself could he answer me; and then the first words he faltered out were—

"There's a dead man yonder! I toorned up his face with my spade. It was a sight to strike me blind!"

"A dead man!" I exclaimed, involuntarily falling some paces away.

"Ay! he lies there agin the hedge. I first unearthed his hair, an' I pulled at it, not knowing what it wur, and the head come oop out o' the soil wi' the jerk."

In an ecstasy of disgust he rubbed his hands madly together, and then wrung the fingers that had touched the corpse.

I thought he must be under a delusion; and seeing the other gardener in the distance, leaning on his spade and watching us, I called and beckoned to him; whereupon he came running towards us.

"Oh, Jim!" groaned the old man, pointing, "there's a dead man yonder! My God, he's a sight to strike me daft! I was diggin' out a plot o' grass to trim the corner o' the lawn with, where it's wore down, meaning to fetch it from oonder the trees where it wouldna' be missed, when I dug up a man's hair, an' as I hope to go to Hiven, I didn't know what it wur, and took an' pulled it, an' the face came out!—don't go near it!—it's

an awful sight! Christ forgive me! had I known what it was, I wouldna' ha' meddled wi' it for the king's money!"

The under-gardener was as white as a sheet. He stammered out something; and then crying, "I'll not go anear it! I can't bear the sight o' such things," walked some paces away, and stood staring at the spot the other man had indicated.

The idea suddenly seized me that this dead man was Mr. Ransome. God knows what put the thought into my head, and made me grasp it as a conviction in the face of the conclusive evidence I had received but a fortnight ago, that Mr. Ransome was living.

My mind disconnected the man I had seen from the man who lay dead beneath the trees at once.

My eagerness to confirm my suspicion rose paramount to all other considerations. I felt my heart turn sick at my own audacity; nevertheless I said to Walters—

"Show me the place where the man lies."

"No, Miss! don't ask me. I can't look at it agin! an' it's no sight for you, or any man or woman."

"Are you afraid of a dead man?" I exclaimed.

He shuddered, but made no answer.

"Will you accompany me?" I called to Poole.

He looked at me sullenly, and replied, "What do you want to see it for? Don't you hear what Walters says, that it's no fit sight for any one!"

"Suppose it should be Mr. Ransome?" I said, thinking aloud, and scarcely conscious of the import of the conjecture.

"Ah, indeed!" exclaimed Poole, looking up and shaking off his sullen manner. "It may be master; and I'll tell you if it is the moment I see him. I don't mind going with you, Miss. You'll come along with us, Joe?"

"No! haven't I told yer?" cried the other, violently starting backwards. "Go an' look at it if you will. One sight o' such a thing's enough for me."

"Run to the house, then," I exclaimed, "and tell Colonel Kilmain what you have seen. There's your cap on the ground yonder."

He picked it up, fixed it with a trem-

bling hand on his head, and walked off quickly.

"This way he said it was, didn't he?" said Poole, walking towards the trees. But when he was in their shadow he stopped.

I also stopped. My curiosity was fast losing its audacity, though I was still so eager to know if this dead man were Mr. Ransome, that to set my mind at rest there were few things I would not have dared.

"Did you ever see a dead man?" whispered Poole, turning a face of ashy paleness towards me. There was something about the man a great deal more intimidating than the idea of beholding a corpse.

"I will wait for Colonel Kilmain," I said; and returned to the open grounds. He came after me, and leaned against a tree.

"I'll wait, too," said he; "I'll not see it alone. It's given Walters a turn, an' it may serve me worse."

He was silent for some moments, and presently said—

"I wouldn't mind wagering a pound against a shillin' that it's Mr. Ransome."

I looked at him steadily, and asked what made him think that.

"Missis," he said, withdrawing from the tree, and bending forwards, "you were watching along with me that night in the terrace—do you remember?"

"What then?"

"You saw Mr. Ransome, did you?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure it was master? Could you swear that the person who stood with his back to the fire, and his face dark with the cover over the lamp, was the same gentleman as left yon house getting on now for eight months ago?"

I stared at him with mingled astonishment and fear; for he was putting into words, and clearly defining to myself the vague and elusive suspicion that had haunted me for the last fortnight.

"Did not you think that man Mr. Ransome?" I asked.

He cast his eyes down, and, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder, exclaimed—

"If he don't lie there I'm willin' to lose a pound agin any man's shillin'."

"But," I replied, "even if he is dead there that should not prove he was not in the drawing-room the other night."

"Supposing he *was* in the drawing-room," he exclaimed. "It'll soon be found out. . . . Ah ! here they come."

I looked up the grounds and saw the Colonel approaching us rapidly, followed by the gardener. He was in his dressing-gown, and walked or almost ran in a breathless manner. He showed no surprise on seeing me, but called out when he was yet some distance off, "What is all this about ?" In a few moments he was at my side.

"Walters says there is a dead body lying under the trees, sir."

"Have you seen it ?" he asked me.

"No, sir."

"Have you courage to see it ?"

No ; my courage was gone.

"Show me where it lies," he said, addressing Walters.

"I'll show you the place, sir ; I can't go near it," replied the old man, wiping his face with a red pocket-handkerchief.

"Was it Mr. Ransome, Joe ?" inquired Poole.

The Colonel turned with a flash upon him.

"What makes you ask that ?" he de-

manded, furiously. "Have you seen the body?"

"No, your honour."

"Then what the devil do you mean by saying it is Mr. Ransome?"

"I asked Joe if it was, sir."

The Colonel looked as if he could have struck him, then walked under the trees, calling to Walters to follow.

Poole strode sulkily off to where he had been at work, and in a few moments was digging with an air of unconcern.

When the others were some distance under the trees, the gardener stopped and pointed. The Colonel pushed forwards and disappeared. The gardener remained where he had halted, looking in my direction. After a lapse of five minutes the Colonel returned; the gloom among the trees was too heavy to enable me to see his face until he was close to me—it was ghastly! He brushed past without appearing to see me; but when he was yards away, he turned and called my name. I went after him.

"Well for you," he exclaimed, "that you have not beheld that sight. It is awful!"

I shuddered with the horror that came

over me, and asked if there were really a dead man there ?

“ Really ! ” he gasped. “ O shocking ! shocking ! He might have lain there for years. His face is gone—the head only is exposed—the rest of the body is under the earth.”

He pressed his hands to his eyes and groaned.

“ Who is it, sir ? Surely not Mr. Ransome ! ” I stammered.

“ Did you not hear the answer I made to that simpleton yonder ? ” he cried, fiercely. “ Mr. Ransome was at that house a fortnight ago—you know he was ! The body under the trees has been where it lies for months—I will swear it ! If you think it is Mr. Ransome, go and look at it and tell me if the decay of a fortnight will make such a picture as you may there see ! ”

We rapidly neared the house. I was silent, marking furtively the efforts he made to subdue himself. On crossing the lawn he stopped.

“ That body must be some stranger’s,” he exclaimed, “ who was trespassing on these grounds, and died suddenly or was killed

there. He lies close to the hedge that divides the estate from the fields."

"But Walters says he was buried when he found him."

"By time! the wind has blown the soil over him and the grass has sprung up around him and so he seems to have been buried. What a horrible discovery! the worst that could have occurred! What am I to do now? I must send to the police, I suppose."

"The body cannot be left where it is."

"You had better go—no, I'll go myself. . . . This will revive all the old detestable suspicion which I had hoped was laid for ever. I'll be foremost now. They shall not say I tried to conceal this discovery. Who can he be! who can he be!"

He muttered this question several times with his eyes fixed vacantly on my face, then wheeled round and hurried into the house.

Neither of the servants knew of the discovery yet, and I was resolved not to be the first to give them the news. Life appeared to be a strange dream just then, wherein the acting was confused, and from which I could wrest no specific meaning. I hid myself in

my room and tried to collect my thoughts. What was the import of the horrible thing that had been found ? I thought of what Poole had said ; and how his assertion that the man he had seen in the drawing-room was not Mr. Ransome, had given life and shape to my own suspicions. And then I wondered if the dead man were Mr. Ransome. If so, and the Colonel's conjecture as to the time the body had been dead were true, then assuredly had he been lying there ever since he was missed—an overwhelming thought. Then what would appear ? that he had committed suicide ? This theory I could not entertain. Had he meant to kill himself, he would have done so in his bedroom. Besides, the body was found under the earth ; and I could not conceive that the winds of seven or eight months, nor of as many years indeed, could heap and plant a grave over the dead. Had he been killed ? By whom ? By Maddox ? Or—and the pulses of my heart seemed arrested by the thought—was this discovery going to confirm old Mrs. Ransome's accusation ?

But my speculations galloped too fast. Was it Mr. Ransome who had been present

in the drawing-room a fortnight before ? Let me say it was, and then it was manifest, on the Colonel's testimony, that he who lay under the trees was not Mr. Ransome. Let me say it was not ; and I involved myself in a maze from which there was absolutely no exit ; because it was taxing my imagination utterly beyond its strength to conceive that any man could be found so like Mr. Ransome 'in person, manners, and voice, and possessing withal the minute personal knowledge that was necessary to the completeness of the impersonation, as to deceive the Colonel and the four gentlemen who had confronted him and persuade them that he was the missing man.

I did not hear the Colonel leave the house ; but presently my ear caught the gruff tones of a man speaking in the kitchen, and in a few moments the door of my room was thrown open, and the cook rushed in to tell me that a corpse had been found in the grounds, and that the gardener was in the kitchen telling them about it. I answered that I was aware of the fact, having been in the grounds at the time of the discovery ; whereat, scared by my coolness, she bolted

out, that she might not miss any portion of Walter's narrative. By-and-by I heard a pair of feet travelling nimbly upstairs. I had no doubt they belonged to the housemaid, who was gone with the news to Mrs. Ransome; and this was the case, for after a short interval she returned with an order for me to attend mistress in the dining-room.

"What is this about a dead body having been found?" Mrs. Ransome exclaimed, when she saw me.

I told her what I knew.

"Where is my father?"

"He has gone, I believe, to inform the police of this discovery."

"Is it known who the dead man is?" she asked, compressing her lips the moment she had spoken and rendering them bloodless.

"No, madam; but I daresay they will find out soon."

"Can it be Mr. Ransome?" she cried. "Where is the gardener? he saw him. Did he describe the face?"

"The face is decayed."

"Can it be Mr. Ransome?" she repeated.

"If so, then he has been murdered by Maddox."

I did not catch the true signification of this remark at the moment, and had she continued speaking I might have passed it by without notice. But the sudden flush that came into her face and then left it blanched beyond the power of words to describe; the quick, agonized movement of her lips; the recoil of her whole figure; the half-reel, the lowered head, the eyes full of torment, flashed its import upon me.

I dared not speak—I dared not look at her. In that breathless interval she succeeded in mastering herself. She made a movement, and I glanced at her. Her hands were clenched, but she held herself erect, and in a low voice said—

"I am so in the habit of associating his first disappearance with Maddox, that I can never think of him—even now—without forgetting that he has been to this house, and is known to be alive. You can understand this."

I answered something at random. She strode across to me and put her hand on

my arm. I felt the pressure of her grasp long after she had removed her fingers.

"In God's name look at me!" she exclaimed, in a voice like a moan. "You forget what habit does. What the habit of thinking for months and months of one thing only—of one wretched and abhorred thing only—does! I said that if the dead body in the grounds is Mr. Ransome he was murdered by Maddox. I forgot that Mr. Ransome is living. Do you understand me? Why will you not look at me and answer?"

"I am looking at you, madam. The only answer I can make to you is, that I pray, with all my heart and strength, that the dead man is not Mr. Ransome."

She let fall my arm, and turned away.

"It is my destiny!" she exclaimed, keeping her back upon me, "that I should be perpetually saying or doing things to misrepresent myself. But I am not to blame. There is no one who speaks to me but is determined to interpret every look and syllable of mine to my prejudice. My dead mother-in-law," she added, with a low, bitter laugh, "gave me a bad name, and,

like the dog of the proverb, I may as well be hanged."

I could find no answer to make to this; but it struck me sorrowfully, and as a remark not very far from the truth.

We neither of us spoke for some moments, and then she confronted me, and inquired if I knew how long her father would be?

"Perhaps an hour," I said.

"What will be done with the body?" she wanted to know.

I answered, that there would be an inquest held upon it; and that, in all probability, every member of her household would have to appear as a witness.

"For what purpose?" she demanded, looking at me searchingly.

"I am little acquainted with these matters," I replied; "but I know that it is always customary for a coroner's jury to assemble when a dead body has been found, in order to learn how he came by his death."

"But if the face is not distinguishable, how will they know who he is?"

"They will probably find some clue in his dress."

"Will they bring him to this house?" she exclaimed, with a shudder.

"I daresay they will, madam. The town-hall, or a tavern near the scene of the discovery, is generally chosen for such inquiries. But we are a good distance from Copsford, and they are not likely to carry the body along the main road."

"Will they examine me, do you think?"

"It is impossible that I should know."

"Don't they expose the body at an inquest, and make the people who give evidence look at it?"

"Yes."

She seated herself hastily, and leaned backwards.

"I wish papa had taken me away before this discovery had been made," she exclaimed, faintly. "Suppose they bring the body to this house! how horrible to feel that such a thing is under one's roof! how horrible to remember that such a thing has tainted the atmosphere in which one lives."

"O, madam," I replied, "do not let us think of the poor dead creature in that way. God knows how he may have died. It is

dreadful to imagine him lying all alone under those dark, silent trees, uncoffined, with never a prayer from living heart to God for him. If he is a stranger, what mourners may he not have left? I am ashamed to think that I was afraid to look at him. Whom can he now harm? The strongest and wisest of us shall be as he is in a very little while; and we are so much more akin to him now that he is dead and corrupted, than ever we could be were he living, that I blush for my humanity when I remember that I shrunk from the thought of going near him."

She shuddered again, and clapped her hands over her face.

I felt there was no more to be said, and after lingering a moment or two softly quitted the room.

An hour after the Colonel had quitted the house he returned with the Inspector and two other men, who came along the avenue bearing a stretcher, which they set down before the door. The housemaid, looking like a ghost, came to tell me they wanted a sheet. I took one from the clothes' press, and went upstairs with it.

The Colonel and the Inspector stood by the stretcher, and the former looked so ill that, for the life of me, I could not help saying to him—

“I hope, sir, it is not necessary that you should again see the body.”

“Why not?” he exclaimed loudly, reproving my sympathy with a violent frown.

The reproof made me feel that I had acted with great impertinence; and I faltered out—

“I beg your pardon, sir; I thought you looked wearied.”

“What do you mean, Miss Avory? For God’s sake be intelligible!” he cried, staring at me; whilst the Inspector stared at us both.

Almost confounded by the quite unexpected effect of my remark, which had been uttered out of my full sympathy for him, I explained that he had himself told me the body was a horrible sight; and I feared that by looking on whilst it was dug up he would be subjecting himself to too heavy a trial.

“Really you are very kind to take so much interest in me,” he exclaimed, with an angry sarcastic laugh, which brought the

blood burning to my cheeks. "Why the sight of the body should affect me more than anybody else you shall take another opportunity to explain. Is that the sheet? Throw it on the stretcher. Mr. Inspector, are we ready? The gardener will find us a spade."

The party moved off. I closed the door, overwhelmed with shame. My tongue had undoubtedly betrayed me into an indiscretion; but still I thought he had acted with great unkindness in refusing to understand the obvious and sole motive I had in addressing him.

I presently got the better of my offended sensitiveness, and seeing the dining-room deserted, went in and watched the party walking down the grounds. The Colonel marched in front, with the Inspector, whose head moved slowly from side to side as he took in the prospect first on his left hand, and then on his right. Presently they hailed Walters, who came to them. An altercation, which found the gardener very obstinate, appeared to take place; which resulted in Poole being called. It was soon apparent to me that both men refused to

disinter the body. One of the bearers of the stretcher cut the matter short by snatching the spade Poole carried out of his hands, and then the four disappeared behind the brow of the hill, leaving the two gardeners staring after them.

For a long while I held my post at the window. The fire in the grate crackled and spurted, and in the silence that reigned throughout the house I could hear the wind sullenly roaring among the leafless branches in the avenue. The scene was no less desolate now than it had been all the morning. The same lead-coloured sky hung like a near pall over the hills; and all around the horizon, not concealing the view, but making it infinitely sad and bleak, was a chilly, crawling mist.

My fancy was fascinated by the horror that lay under the distant trees, and set to work to image the thing as it would be seen when the soil that hid it was dug away, and the body exposed to view. Again and again I asked myself if this dead man could be Mr. Ransome, and if he had died there, or been murdered, and if killed, who was his murderer. And though the body

should not prove to be Mr. Ransome, could I continue to believe that the man who had come to the house a fortnight before was he? Imagination was quickened by the tragic circumstance of the time, and I found myself reasoning from premises that had not before occurred to me. Thus, I remembered that the lamp had burned dimly in the hall on that night Mr. Ransome was expected, and that the room in which the meeting had been held had been rendered so gloomy, that it was with difficulty I had distinguished the lineaments of the man who confronted the gentlemen. But when I recalled the impression his face had made on me, I was again infinitely puzzled: for beyond all question, in size, shape, eyes, in every point I could recal, he who had stood with his back to the fire was Mr. Ransome.

I was recalled from these reflections by the sight of the party returning. The Inspector walked in advance; behind him followed the men, bearing the stretcher now covered with a sheet; by the side of the stretcher was the Colonel.

I crouched back from the window. If

ever I had boasted my courage, I felt its worthlessness then. I trembled from head to foot. My pen cannot describe the picture as I beheld it ; the ghastliness of the white sheet contrasted with the sombre sky overhead ; the bending figures of those who bore the stretcher ; in the distance, the two gardeners close together watching.

Were they going to bring the body to the house ? Surely. When they were yet some distance off, they halted, and the Colonel came forward quickly. I waited in the hall to receive his orders. He threw open the door violently and entered, stopped abruptly, pressing his hand over his heart, and then in a hollow voice requested me to get him some brandy. I flew to the sideboard and returned with a bottle and a wineglass ; he filled the glass full and emptied it, half filled it again and swallowed the draught, and handed me the bottle.

"The body is to be taken to the spare-bedroom."

"Who is it, sir ?"

"Mr. Ransome, the Inspector thinks. Is my daughter in her bedroom ?"

"I believe so."

"See that her door is closed. Off with you !"

I slunk away stunned. Mrs. Ransome's bedroom door was shut. I hurried below and was met by the cook.

"Are they bringing it here ?" she whispered.

"Yes," I replied. "Hush ! where is Sarah ?"

"Here," answered the girl, coming out of the kitchen.

"Do not go upstairs either of you," I exclaimed.

"Tell me, only tell me, Miss, I am dying to know," burst out the cook ; "is it Mr. Ransome ?"

I refused to answer her, and motioning her back, went to my room and shut the door.

When the agitation into which I had been thrown by what the Colonel had told me was in some measure passed, my curiosity again came to the front and I opened the door to hear what was going on upstairs. All was quiet. I concluded that the Colonel was with his daughter in her bedroom, and was debating whether there was any need

for me to remain in the basement, when footsteps sounded in the hall—a heavy, creaking professional tramp—and the Inspector came to the head of the kitchen stairs and looked down. I shrunk away, having no wish to undergo a cross-examination. He presently began to march up and down the hall.

I passed the next two hours in my room, incessantly pondering over the extraordinary fatality of this discovery and wearying myself with conjectures as to how it would all end. I could not understand the Colonel's meaning by the answer he had made to my question about the dead man ; for if the Inspector knew the body was Mr. Ransome's, the Colonel should know it too ; yet his answer had implied that he did not know. Perhaps he had not dared look at the corpse, and so got his information about it at secondhand.

It was now long past the lunch hour, and the cook wanted to receive orders. There seemed a kind of mockery in the thought of taking food under such circumstances ; but nature had to be supported somehow or other ; and I considered it my

duty to go upstairs and ask Mrs. Ransome for instructions.

I crept softly, for the presence of the dead seemed to impose a strange need of stealthiness and silence. The dining-room door was ajar, and through the opening I saw a constable sitting close to the door. So then the Inspector had been relieved; but I had not heard the constable come to the house.

He followed me with his eyes, his duty being to prevent any one from leaving the house.

The drawing-room door was shut; I thought Mrs. Ransome might be there, and peeped in. I was surprised to find the Colonel alone, seated in an arm-chair with his arms folded. I was hastily withdrawing when he pronounced my name, and on my looking in again, desired me to enter and shut the door. I apologized for my intrusion and explained that I was seeking Mrs. Ransome.

"Don't go near her," he exclaimed. "She must be left alone. What do you want?"

I spoke of the lunch.

"For whom? not for us. Neither of us could taste food. Sit down for a moment,

Miss Ivory. I was sorry to speak to you so rudely this morning. I perfectly appreciated your kindness in desiring me not to witness the disinterment of the body. I felt ill, and no doubt looked so. But all the same your advice was unwise, because the Inspector is full of suspicion, and he would not have scrupled to form any monstrous conclusion on the mere idea, suggested by you, that I was afraid to look at the dead man."

"I am very sorry, sir. I understand the reason of your anger now. I should have taken this view."

"We will say no more about it; the discovery of the body is an awful calamity. I have a conviction that it is not Mr. Ransome; still it may prove so."

"But what makes the Inspector think it is, sir?"

"The body is dressed in Mr. Ransome's coat."

I started and exclaimed, "Who else then can it be?"

"They would not give me time to examine the body closely," he said, pressing his hands convulsively together, and looking

downwards with a most piteous expression. "‘It was for the jury to decide, not for me,’ the Inspector kept on saying; and they laid the body on the stretcher, and covered it up; and there is a man there—pointing towards the door—who will not let me enter the room in which it lies.”

“But how should the Inspector know that the body has Mr. Ransome’s coat on?” I asked.

“There are some letters in one of the pockets. The man wouldn’t show them to me. We crammed them back, and then the body was laid on the stretcher, and covered. All that he said was, ‘This is Mr. Ransome.’”

“Did you not say, sir, that the body appeared to have been lying where it was found for many months?”

“Yes, it has mouldered away into a ghastlier thing than the mind can conceive,” he answered.

“Then, sir, you can be sure it was not Mr. Ransome, for he was here a fortnight ago.”

He started, looked up, and clenched his hand.

"That is my reason," he cried out, hoarsely, "for saying this dead man is not Mr. Ransome. The body would be fresh—must be fresh, if it were he! This man has been lying there months and months—there is no face left—he is a skeleton in clothes—an awful sight!"

The blood rushed into his head, and the veins grew knotted about his temples; never was countenance more tragical than his while he continued staring at me, and the blood darkened his skin, and drops of moisture gathered upon his forehead.

I dared not hazard any more questions. I asked him if he would let me bring him some refreshment. He shook his head violently, and waved his hand without speaking. Before I reached the door he cried out to me not to go near his daughter; she was not to be spoken to—she must be left alone.

I left the room, bewildering my mind with the new and conflicting information he had communicated.

A little after two o'clock a coffin was brought to the house—three men carried it—and an old woman came with it; and they

all went into the bedroom where the corpse was. After they had been there some minutes, the old woman came downstairs for some hot water. I was in the kitchen when she entered, and shrank from her as from something evil. Indeed, she was ugly enough to have sat for the portrait of the hag who turns over the contents of the trunk in the last plate of the wonderful "Rake's Progress." She did not speak a word. She took a jug from the dresser, put it under the cock of the boiler, and stood working her jaws as she watched the steam. When the jug was full she raised it and tottered out of the kitchen. I heard her scraping her way upstairs and along the hall, and then the bedroom door was shut. Not more than half an hour was occupied by these people to prepare the body for the inquest. When their task was accomplished they glided out of the house noiselessly.

As if these circumstances, crowding upon each other's heels, were not exciting enough, a new and extravagant detail was communicated by the presence of a crowd of persons in the avenue. Ill news, it is said,

flies apace; and it was very certain it had not lagged in this instance.

I first caught sight of the people from the window of my own room. There were a good many children in the crowd, a number of men, and several women, some of them with babies in their arms. They were very orderly, and stood staring intently at the house. The coffin had probably attracted them, or maybe the report had spread that a dead body had been found at Garden-hurst; and guessing the mission of the coffin-bearers, a crowd had followed to the gates, from where, finding no portion of the proceedings were to be seen from the road, they had gradually pushed their way into the grounds.

I was very indignant at the sight of these intruders, and was about to run upstairs, when, to my great satisfaction, I saw the Inspector, followed by a couple of constables, propelling his way by the officer-like process of planting his elbows in the chests of those nearest at hand; and in a very few minutes the avenue was deserted.

The Inspector now returned with one of the constables, having perhaps left the other

to guard the gates ; and when Sarah came downstairs, after having admitted him, she told me he had ordered her to leave the door open, as the coroner and jury were expected to arrive in a few minutes.

I hoped that Mrs. Ransome had not seen the crowd. There was something peculiarly degrading in *their* presence. I wondered that she chose to be alone. Guilty or innocent, her full heart would surely need the solace of utterance. If innocent, how terrible must be the sense of the dreadful humiliation that had been brought upon her and her father ! If guilty, what must be her thoughts, knowing that she was standing on the very brink of discovery ! My sympathy was so strong that I was about to go to her, in defiance of her father's injunction ; but the resolution was driven out of my mind by a sudden disturbance upstairs, caused by the arrival of some of the jury. They were conducted into the library, where they were kept waiting for the others, who shortly arrived. I then heard them all go upstairs.

I was ignorant of the meaning of their movements, and listened to their footsteps

curiously. Presently the two gardeners came into the kitchen through the back door, followed by a constable, who stepped up to me and asked me my name. On my replying, he exclaimed, "Oh, you are to give evidence. You are not to go upstairs, please, until you are called."

"I suppose I may go into my room?" I said.

"That there?"

"Yes."

"Anybody in it?"

"No."

"Yes, you can stop there."

Saying which he re-entered the kitchen. I had sense enough to understand that the discovery of the body was a very grave affair, which might involve a charge of murder, and that some restraint was necessary to prevent collusion among the witnesses.

I had now to wait for above half an hour, during which some of the other witnesses were examined; and then I was told to go upstairs by the constable. The Inspector received me without speaking, and mounted to the bedroom, motioning me to follow. I

made strong efforts to control myself, but my agitation was very great, and my nerves, as I entered the bedroom, threatened to give way.

The scene into which I was admitted was one that might have fairly oppressed a stouter heart than mine. The window-blinds were drawn up, and the coffin, supported on chairs, had been placed close to the window to receive the light. The sheet that had covered the body was thrown negligently over the foot of the coffin, which was of a pale yellow. I halted when I saw this dreadful object and a sudden faintness came over me. To my surprise the Inspector, dropping his dictatorial tone, approached me and said very kindly, "You are only required to take one look. It's necessary for the evidence you'll be called on to give. The others have viewed it. You must take heart—there's nothing to hurt you."

I stared at the coffin, shuddering violently, but at the same time laying the utmost control upon myself, because I knew it was absolutely necessary that I should look at the body. I now observed that the lid

of the coffin framed a long piece of glass. The Inspector took my hand, quite gently, for which I felt immeasurably grateful to him, and I walked with all the boldness I could summon to the side of the coffin and looked through the glass.

For some moments I could see nothing, for my head swam and the glass seemed dark ; then the outline beneath defined itself and I saw—but what I saw I will not describe. The memory haunts me to this hour, and often makes a portion of my dreams.

“Take particular notice of what you see,” said the Inspector ; “that’ll help you to tell the jury what you think.”

I did so, being now able to discern the ghastly and shapeless contents of the coffin clearly enough ; and then sick, cold, and horror-stricken, I backed away, and walked with faltering movements to the door.

I was detained, however, by the Inspector, who took a coat, which I had not perceived, from the side of the coffin, and asked me to inspect it. I drew near and looked at it attentively. The cloth was green, in portions mouldy, and stained by the damp

of the earth. I could not pretend to say of what material the coat was made ; in shape it was loose, with pockets at the side and a breast pocket, from which the Inspector drew three papers and desired me to look at them. The first of these papers was a receipt from a harness-maker at Copsford, made out to Mr. Ransome ; the second was a letter from old Mrs. Ransome, dated from Guildford ; the third was a portion of a letter, but whether in his own writing or not I could not say. But very few of the words were decipherable owing to the humidity having caused the ink to run. The harness-maker's receipt, however, was in good preservation, and the words "To — Ransome, Esq.," written on a ruled line at the head of the bill, were very distinct.

I breathed freely when I was out of that room. The Inspector told me to stop in the hall ; but I had not waited above twenty seconds when the cook came out of the dining-room, yellow with fear, and made for the kitchen staircase with surprising agility.

The Inspector now desired me to enter the dining-room ; I did so, and found myself in the presence of a number of men,

two of whom were familiar to me as our baker and chemist. I was in the temper to be easily frightened ; but happily the coroner, one Dr. Sheldon, was, without exception, the most amiable looking old gentleman I ever saw. His glance met mine so kindly that I was at once reassured, and felt as collected as perhaps under the circumstances it was necessary I should feel.

I recal the scene distinctly ; but recollect only the leading questions which were put to me. There was one little man with a very snappish manner and a very sour face, who frequently interrupted the coroner's examination with irrelevant questions which he delivered with an air of great knowingness, and then dropped his head on one side, with an artful smile at his companions, to catch my answer. The rest were very grave and attentive, and obviously considered the coroner a great man.

Were I to relate even what I can remember of the examination I underwent, the record would extend to a great many pages. An abridgment of my answers would present the substance of the evidence I gave in this form :

That my name was Caroline Avory and that I was housekeeper ; and that I had been in my present situation since June. Had viewed the body and was sure it was not Mr. Ransome's ; because the hair on the head of the body was brown, and Mr. Ransome's hair was very black. Could not identify the body with any person I had ever seen, owing to the face being decayed out of all resemblance to anything human. Could not say whether the coat was Mr. Ransome's or not. Remembered seeing him wear a coat cut in that fashion. Had seen the papers found in the pocket of the coat, but could not imagine how they had come there. Was quite positive the body was not Mr. Ransome's for two reasons : first, that its decomposed state proved it to have been dead for many weeks, whereas Mr. Ransome was alive and at his house a fortnight before ; secondly, neither the hair, nor, so far as the outline could be distinguished, the shape of the head, was that of Mr. Ransome. Could swear that all Mr. Ransome's linen was marked with his initials, S. R. Knew that he was mad and of very eccentric habits, but had never heard that he was

subject to fits. Had heard footsteps outside the house on the night Mr. Ransome was missed ; was sure that some one had been walking in the grounds. Could not tell whether the body was the footman's ; believed it more likely to be the footman's than Mr. Ransome's ; but considered if it were the footman's it could be identified.

And so on : evidence that conveyed no further illumination than my profound conviction that the body was not Mr. Ransome's. Two of the jury tried hard to shake me on this point ; but my persuasion was too firm for them. It was enough that the body had brown hair. To suppose that black hair would turn brown after death was absurd ; and unless this could be supposed, then most assuredly the dead man was not Mr. Ransome. The coroner took up one of the jury on this and silenced him. I then left the room.

Shortly afterwards the jury withdrew to the library to consider their verdict. When I got downstairs I found the under-gardener and the cook hotly arguing. Poole was very quiet and determined. As I passed the door the cook cried out to me to come

and say if I believed the body lying upstairs was master's.

"No," I replied ; "who says it is ?"

"I say it is, an' I'll swear it," rejoined Poole.

"You must be as blind as a mole," exclaimed Walters, "not to know the difference between brown hair and black."

"I don't care nothing for that," retorted the other. "It's brown now, but it was black once."

"That's nonsense," I said. "The coroner himself will tell you so. By such assumptions you may prove the dead man anybody."

"Besides," cried the cook, "the Inspector himself told me that the body must have been lying under the trees for months an' months to be in that state ; and have you lost your memory not to know that Mr. Ransome was alive an' hearty this day a fortnight ago ?"

"Alive an' hearty, yes !" sneered Poole, with a glance at me. "Did yer see him ?"

"You did, and so did I," I exclaimed.

"Ah, and so we did. And pray was you satisfied that he *was* Mr. Ransome ?" he demanded, very impudently.

The cook and the gardener stared, and the first said, "Why, what's come to yer, man ? Would you fly in the face of the gentlemen as saw him wi' their own eyes and was satisfied ?"

"Saw him !" said the man, contemptuously ; "I reckon they saw as much of me. Why was the light turned down, and the shadder thrown over his face, I should like to know ?"

"Have you spoken to the Colonel of these doubts of yours ?" I asked him.

"No, I haven't," he answered, fiercely ; "but I don't fear his knowing of them."

"Then you had better do so. If you don't, I will."

"So you may, and be d—— to you !" he cried. "I'm not afraid of you nor the Colonel either, nor e'er a one in this house. What I told the jury I'll stick to : that the man upstairs is Mr Ransome !"

And with a brutal laugh the fellow walked out of the kitchen.

There was something far more puzzling than irritating in this man's reckless boldness. What made him assume as a *fact* the notion that had flashed across my mind only

as a suspicion, and a suspicion so dangerous and alarming that I summarily rejected it as often as it recurred to me ?

Walters was beginning to comment on his mate's rude and violent behaviour, when the cook interrupted him by crying, " Hark ! " The jury were leaving the library and returning to the dining-room with their verdict.

I went out of the kitchen, greatly excited, and mounted the staircase halfway, fearing to advance and listening with strained attention. In a short time the jury left the dining-room and filled the hall. There was a great buzz among them whilst they adjusted their hats. I ascended to the top of the stairs, determined to know what the verdict was ; but was at once reassured by the sight of the Colonel, who was conversing with the coroner, and whose face, white and thin and sickly-looking, wore a smile.

I said to a tall, beetle-browed man, " Will you tell me the verdict ? "

" Why, ma'am, that the man is dead ; but who he is, and how he came by his death, there is no evidence to show. "

I thanked him, and slipped away out of the hall.

This, then, was the end of it ! And how would the public receive the verdict ? The dead man was most unquestionably *not* Mr. Ransome. The jury had obviously found that out by better evidence than any I could have given them. But if he was not Mr. Ransome, how came he with Mr. Ransome's coat on, and with letters belonging to Mr. Ransome on him ? And what made Poole so positive that he *was* Mr. Ransome ? I had before, involuntarily, and on no better evidence than the casual meeting him on the terrace, suspected Poole of having played some part in the mystery which had puzzled Copsford, and those who knew what Copsford never could know, ever since the day of Mr. Ransome's disappearance ; but his behaviour in the kitchen—his dogged declaration that the dead man was Mr. Ransome, his equally dogged declaration that the man who had been brought to the house by the Colonel was not Mr. Ransome—all decided me in regarding him as capable of explaining the whole of the mystery away, if he chose to tell what he knew. At all events,

I resolved to have a talk with the Colonel about him.

By half-past three the house was deserted, and not very long afterwards a hearse drove up, and some men came in and carried the coffin away. The gloom seemed to lift with the departure of that ghastly burden; but I was sure that the room in which it had been deposited would never be entered again by those to whom the house belonged, and that it furnished an association which, during the remainder of the time the Colonel and Mrs. Ransome stayed at Gardenhurst, would make their home insupportable and odious to them.

IX.

The afternoon wore away, and a little before six o'clock the Colonel sent for me. The night had fallen densely, with a high wind that whirled the snow flakes in the air, and sometimes brought smart discharges of hail against the windows.

He was in the dining-room.

"I have been with my daughter all the afternoon. She has been very ill. They

made her look at the body, which was cruel. It was an unfit sight for a woman to behold. And after she had given her evidence, she went to her bedroom and fainted, and there she lay on the floor, unconscious, for an hour."

"Oh, sir, I wish I had known it!" I exclaimed. "You told me not to go near her."

"She is better now. You can take a cup of tea presently to her. What a day this has been?"

"Thank God it has ended, and ended well, sir!"

"Did you see the body?"

"Yes."

"It was a shocking sight," he said, with a shudder.

"I cannot understand why they should have tried to identify it with Mr. Ransome, sir. The coroner, as a doctor, must have known that the poor man, whoever he is, has been dead many weeks; and were they not all aware that Mr. Ransome was here a fortnight ago?"

I faltered as I asked this question. He took me up quickly.

"Of course they were aware; and that helped them to their verdict. A doctor named Mason examined the body when it was upstairs, and gave medical evidence."

"What evidence, sir?"

"Why, that he could find no marks of violence. For my part, I don't think he had the stomach to examine the loathsome thing. I believe he stared at it through the glass, and pronounced upon what he saw. The face had mouldered away, and I should imagine that without a minute inspection it would be impossible to detect signs of violence on that part of the head amid such corruption. Did they show you the coat?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was it Mr. Ransome's?"

"I could not possibly say."

"How came the letters there?"

"That is a mystery."

"Ay, more bewildering than anything that has yet occurred. The trousers and waistcoat were of coarse material, and did not match the coat. There was no mark on the linen. The boots had rotted, and

broken open. He might have been a year lying where he was found."

"Was he not buried, sir, when found?"

"He was close to the surface. Whether his grave was dug for him or not I cannot imagine. Had he borne signs of violence, then they would have said that his grave had been dug."

"Did it occur to anybody to suggest that he was Maddox?" I said.

He started, looked at me earnestly, and said—

"The footman! I never thought of that. Why should it not be Maddox? The existence of the letters belonging to Mr. Ransome might then be explained."

"Easily, sir; by supposing that the letters were stolen from his master's bedroom."

"But for what purpose?"

"I cannot guess."

"But nothing *but* the letters were found in the man's pocket. You remember the footman—I never saw him: stay—I forget. I saw him when I came to Gardenhurst from Boulogne; but I have no recollection of his face and appearance. Did the dead man resemble him in any particular?"

"In more than I can recal, sir. Yet whom *could* such a thing resemble?"

"Was Maddox's hair brown?"

"It was dark; but you must remember, sir, that I had not been here long when he was missed, and during that time I saw but very little of him—not enough to leave a distinct impression of him upon my mind, as I discover now, when I endeavour to recollect his face."

"This is a curious conjecture of yours, though," he exclaimed. "Suppose the dead man should be Maddox?"

I was silent. He looked at me inquiringly.

"I am striving to recal him," I said. "Maddox was of a middle height, with a somewhat similar cast of face to Mr. Ransome's—I mean, the jawbones were long and the face thin. The dead man—I could see nothing of him!" I exclaimed, shuddering at the hideous recollection.

"Let us imagine the dead man Maddox," he said, taking a chair, and motioning me to be seated. "How came he where he was found? Did he die there, or was he killed? But he would not be dressed like

that, would he? I know what his livery would be. What was his undress?"

"He always worked in the morning in a sleeved waistcoat and black cloth trousers. If he had to answer the door he would slip on his coat belonging to his livery."

"The body was not dressed in black cloth?"

"No, sir."

He was a long while silent, and then repeated—

"Suppose the man *should* be Maddox?"

"The body is certainly not Mr. Ransome."

"No; that is past doubt. The letters prove nothing; they make a mystery, but they prove nothing."

"It might have been surmised that this man was Maddox; that Mr. Ransome had killed him, and was hiding himself for fear of the consequences."

"Why may not the surmise be entertained now?" he demanded, eagerly.

"Because Mr. Ransome was here a fortnight ago, sir."

"Ah, to be sure," he replied, drawing back and clasping his hands firmly. "The

chain is so confused that I am apt to overlook some of the links."

I took care not to let him see that I noticed his confusion.

"Your under-gardener, Poole," I said, "declares positively that the dead man is Mr. Ransome."

"Yes; he was the only one of the witnesses who stated that. He is a block-head, and acquitted himself like one during the examination. He showed a curious animus against us by implying that Mr. Ransome had been murdered, and that the body upstairs was his. He knew, of course, that that had been the current suspicion for a good many months. I shall discharge him by-and-by, but I must not be in a hurry; it would not answer my purpose for people to say the man was discharged for suggesting that Mr. Ransome had been murdered."

"He may be a blockhead, sir, but he is a very dangerous one. He does not scruple to declare it as his opinion, that the man who came to this house a fortnight ago was not Mr. Ransome."

"He says that!" he exclaimed, knitting

his brows. "Did he give his reasons for having this notion?"

"No, sir."

"You found him peering from the terrace into the drawing-room that night?"

"Yes."

He got up, went to the window, and stood there for some moments, his face concealed from me. Presently he turned and said—

"You supply me with a good reason for discharging him. He *is* dangerous. That notion of his would be a very compromising rumour to start, wouldn't it? After this discovery and inquest too! Your suggestion about Maddox has put a thought into my head; but I am not sure that I shall act upon it. The inquest is over, the body will be buried. I shall require a little reflection before I resolve to disturb these ashes again, and fix attention upon a new inquiry. And now, Miss Ivory, will you be so kind as to take my daughter a cup of tea, and see how she is."

This was the most unsatisfactory conversation I had ever had with him. Whatever his views were, he had not conveyed them.

That he believed the dead man to be Maddox, or that he believed him Mr. Ransome; that he believed Mr. Ransome dead, or that he believed him alive; that he believed the man whom the detective Johnson had found to be Mr. Ransome, or that he believed him to be somebody else—was as little to be guessed by me from his manner, as the name of the body was to be guessed from the inquest that had been held upon it.

What, then, was this mystery? for a mystery there was, dark and complex, known to the Colonel and his daughter, and to them alone. Had Poole any share in it? He had worked for some years on the estate; he had, to the best of my knowledge, always been well-treated by Mrs. Ransome; it was impossible, therefore, to suppose that the evidence he had given, or rather the assertions he had made, were dictated by ill-feeling towards his employers. Surely I might almost be justified in supposing that he had a particular reason either for knowing Mr. Ransome to be dead, or for wishing him dead, by his declaring that the discovered body was Mr. Ransome's. He

might, indeed, have been deceived by a fancied resemblance ; he might even believe that the humidity of the earth, which had rotted and coloured the clothes into an indistinguishable texture, would likewise transform the hair from black into brown. But certainly his obstinacy would yield to the conjoint testimony of the other witnesses, who, every one of us, had positively affirmed that the corpse was not Mr. Ransome's.

His tenacity, however, persuaded me that he was sincere in his belief that the man who had come to the house a fortnight before was not Mr. Ransome. The most ignorant person could not have beheld the condition of the corpse without being quite satisfied that it had been dead for months. To assert, then, that this body was Mr. Ransome's, was tantamount to saying that Mr. Ransome had been dead for many months.

These thoughts occupied my mind whilst I prepared the tea which I was to carry to Mrs. Ransome ; and when the tray was prepared, I took it upstairs.

I knocked timidly, not being sure that

my visit would be welcome. Mrs. Ransome's voice bade me enter. I found her lying in her dressing-gown upon the sofa, which had been wheeled close to the fire. A pair of candles were alight on the mantel-piece. The atmosphere of the room was almost disagreeable, with the mingled perfumes of toilet-vinegar and other scents. She looked pale and exhausted, and her heavy white arm, bare to the elbow, hung languidly down over the side of the sofa.

I told her that her father had requested me to bring her some tea. She thanked me without turning her head, but did not ask me to sit. I could tell by her few words of thanks that she had not the strength to converse, and was looking about her to see in what way I could make her more comfortable before quitting the room, when she asked me in a low tone if I had been examined by the jury.

I replied that I had.

"Did they make you look into the coffin?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Will you ever forget what you saw? Whilst I live that horrible sight will haunt

me. Why did they force me to look at it?"

"There were no other means of identifying him. All the witnesses had to look. We were thus enabled positively to declare that the dead man was not Mr. Ransome."

"Suppose he had turned out to be Mr. Ransome, what would have been done?" she inquired, rousing herself a little.

"Such a discovery would have been very unfortunate and menacing, after the suspicions which have been bandied about."

"People, of course, would have said that he had been murdered, and that his mother was in the right when she accused me of the crime."

"No doubt something of the kind would have been said."

"And what would they have done to me?"

"Nothing. What proofs would they have to go upon?"

"Will the matter end now?" she demanded, with a small feverish impatience quickening her physical lassitude.

"No doubt. The jury are satisfied that the dead man is a stranger. How he came

where he was found, and how he managed to have letters belonging to Mr. Ransome on him, are problems which may never be solved. The face was decayed beyond all possibility of recognition, and the worst that can now be said is, that the body of a man was found at Gardenhurst, under what the newspapers call suspicious circumstances."

"The letter from Mrs. Ransome was dated last April, papa told me. The harness-maker's bill is two years old."

"Indeed! I forgot to ask Colonel Kilmain about the dates of these papers. I *cannot* imagine how this unknown man came by them."

"Could not they tell whether he had been murdered or not?"

"It seems they could find no signs to indicate a violent death. Suppose he was murdered. A single blow might have killed him. That blow need not necessarily leave such a mark as would be distinguishable amid the decay of the body. In the absence of such sign, I don't see what other conclusion the jury could have arrived at than the plain verdict they recorded."

"Who could he have been?" she inquired. "How came he at Gardenhurst? Was he a friend of Mr. Ransome? But even that would not account for his having papers of Mr. Ransome upon him."

"I asked Colonel Kilmain if he thought the body was Maddox's."

She started forward, and exclaimed, with a deep-drawn breath—

"It may have been Maddox!"

"The hair was brown. Maddox's hair was brown, was it not, madam?"

"It was dark, certainly," she answered, looking at me eagerly.

"Unfortunately," I continued, "the hair was the only recognisable sign the body presented. There was literally nothing else that would help to prove the theory that this man was Maddox. Nothing was found in his pockets but those letters of Mr. Ransome. Whoever the man was, it was pretty certain that if he was not murdered he was robbed. One cannot conceive that a man would be wandering about with nothing in his pockets but letters belonging to another man, of no use to him."

"But is *nothing* to be said in favour of

your conjecture that he was Maddox?" she said, sinking back and resuming her listless manner. "Let it be one or the other of them; master or man—it would not matter. One of them, dead, might explain the disappearance of the other."

"You mean the original disappearance?"

"Yes, of course," she answered, quickly.

"We know, on Mr. Ransome's confession, that he knew nothing of Maddox and the robbery of the plate."

"I told you that myself."

"Yes, madam, you did."

"But are we bound to believe what Mr. Ransome says? Make me believe that the dead man whom we have seen to-day is Maddox, and you will convince me that he was murdered by Mr. Ransome."

"I should hesitate to take that view, even supposing we knew this body to be the footman's. Had we not full proof that Mr. Ransome was living a fortnight ago, there would be much more probability in the conjecture that the body was his, and that he had been murdered by Maddox."

She sipped her tea languidly, and said, "Mr. Ransome had not brown hair."

I was anxious to drop the subject, for I found myself getting into a labyrinth, and dreaded lest I should make some remark, inadvertently, to lead her to suspect that I questioned the identity of the man who had been brought to the house by her father. On this account I said nothing to her about Poole. There were many reasons why I should not appear to possess such a suspicion. I had largely shared her own and her father's confidence, and could not, consistently with the gratitude I felt towards them both for many acts of kindness, imply my belief of their being guilty of an extravagant imposition, the maintenance of which made falsehood a compulsory condition of their actions and speech. Again, in the event of my suspicion proving right, I had to consider the great provocation the Colonel had received to practise this imposition, in the overwhelming accusation old Mrs. Ransome had brought against his daughter, and in the sinister scandal that had been circulated to her dishonour in Copsford. But chiefly I had to consider that my suspicion might be quite unwarrantable; and certainly, when I came to

examine the foundation on which it rested, I could refer it to no better origin than the assertion of Poole (who could not know more of the truth than I), and to one or two slips I had noticed in the Colonel's and his daughter's conversation with me.

She continued harping for some time on my theory, that the dead man might be Maddox; and then she told me the questions which had been put to her by the coroner, and how she had fainted when she reached her bedroom. At this juncture her father entered the room, which gave me an opportunity to slip away.

I little guessed, as I went downstairs, how very close we all were to the solution of one portion of the mystery, of which these pages tell the story. Fateful as the day had proved, the strangest of the events which belonged to it had yet to happen.

On reaching the basement, I heard the sound of a male voice in the kitchen, and there found the upper-gardener, Walters.

"Good evening, mum," said he. "I thought I'd just step this way, to larn if there was anything fresh."

The kitchen was very warm, and looked

very comfortable. A bright red fire glowed in the grate, and shone in the well-polished crockery and glasses upon the dresser. Through the window one might see the snow-flakes falling, gleaming white in the light as they dropped softly past the black glass. At the end of the table sat the housemaid, sewing, the picture of a smart English servant. The cook confronted the gardener, her red, fat arms upon the table, her attitude and face alive with the curiosity and awe the events of the day had inspired in her soul. The gardener looked rather shiny with the snow that had melted upon his shoulders. He was partaking of some tea and bread and butter, which the hospitable cook had been good enough to set before him. Very homely and honest was the aspect of his old brown face, freed of the stains and damp of his day's labour by a plentiful application of soap. The scene was so cosy that I was tempted to draw one of the wooden chairs from the wall.

"I hope the mistress ain't none the worse for what's happened," exclaimed Walters.

"The sight of the body made her ill," I answered.

"An awful sight!" said the cook. "Sarah and me sleep together to-night. I wouldn't lie alone not if I was to be boiled alive for refusin'."

"You should ha' seen it as I did," exclaimed Walters. "Close agin the hedge the grass is pretty short and fine. I took my spade and planned out a good-sized sod, ready for lifting. Then I dug my spade in, and heaved up; but the tool slipped, as though I had struck glass, and brings up some stuff along wi't which I fell on my knees to look at, for I reckoned it wur a new kind of plant, and was puzzled by it. I did think it uncommon like hair too; an' when my nose wer close agin it I noticed that the mould had a queer look—a kind o' crumbly look—though it was hard enough wi' the frost. I give a kind o' pull at the hair, not knowin' it to be such, and the soil gives way like pie-crust, and out came the man's head; an' I think it drove me daft for awhile, for I stood looking at it a bit quite silly."

"I should have run away! I should

have thought I had opened a hole for the devil to come through!" said the cook, in a faint voice.

"What 'ud ha' been the good of running away?" replied Walters. "Had he looked like a dead man I'd ha' felt no fear, no more than if I wur looking at you. It wur the suddenness of the head jumping up out o' the mould, and the ugly, mangled face as came out along with it, as turned me sick and silly."

"All of us here," said I, "saw the body in the coffin; did any of you trace a likeness to anybody you knew in it?"

"There wur nothing to see—nothing like a man, I mean," replied the gardener.

"Do you remember Maddox?"

"I remember him, rather," cried the cook.

"Did it strike you that the dead man might be Maddox?"

"No," answered the cook, breathlessly. "Is he Maddox?"

"I am sure I don't know," I replied. "Maddox had brown hair, and so had the body."

"I don't think Maddox's hair was brown,

mum," said the gardener. "It was darker than brown—it was very near black."

"You're wrong," exclaimed the cook; "it was lighter than brown; it was more the colour of your hair, Miss Ivory."

"I say it was very near black," persisted the gardener. "Cast your thoughts back, missis, an' you'll agree with me."

"If he *is* Maddox," said I, "he'll not owe his identification to us. But the matter is of no consequence, for the jury have disposed of it as far as it can be disposed of."

"They made me look at the corpse," said the housemaid, "when they found out I had opened the door to Mr. Ransome that night he came here. I didn't notice the hair was brown."

"What colour wur it then?" asked the gardener.

"More the colour of my hair," she replied; her hair was a light auburn.

The old man pish'd, and drank his tea.

I began to appreciate the difficulties lawyers complain of in trying to obtain evidence. Here were four of us, all professing to know exactly what we were talking about, flatly contradicting each other.

I changed the subject by asking Walters when his daughter was going to be married to Poole.

"Oh, it's off," he answered. "She an' him quarrelled some time ago. His temper don't please her."

"She has acted wisely in my opinion," said I. "There's something wrong about him, and I should very much like to find out what it is. What made him so impertinent to me to-day?"

"Something's come over him lately that's often puzzled me myself," replied Walters. "He used to work well when he first came here; but he's grown very careless and skulking, and I'm constantly at him for neglecting his work and doing things wrong. He talks of goin' away—leavin' the country. The sooner the better—that's what I says."

"Fancy his declaring that wasn't Mr. Ransome who came here the other day," exclaimed the cook. "Is he in his right mind, I wonder?"

"One would think to hear him talk," said I, "that he knew more about Mr. Ransome than he chose to tell. His declaring that the dead man was Mr. Ran-

some, in defiance of his own eyes—for he was in the terrace that night peeping at the gentlemen in the drawing-room through the window—seems very suspicious to me.”

“If the dead man *had* been Mr. Ransome,” cried the cook, warmly, “it would be as likely as not that Poole had murdered him !”

“Hush !” said Walters, “you mustn’t talk like that !”

“Did he ever speak to you about Mr. Ransome ?” I asked the old man.

“Well, yes ; more nor I cared to hear. When them suspicions about Mrs. Ransome first got about, he was always knocking off work to come an’ have a yarn about the master. But I wouldn’t have nothin’ to say to him. It wur no business of his or mine.”

“What did he say ?”

“Why, that his notion was, Mr. Ransome *was* murdered, an’ that the murder ’ud one day be brought to light.”

“How should he know, if he didn’t do it hisself ?” demanded the cook.

“His idea was,” continued the old man, taking up his cap and looking towards the

door, "that Maddox had played off on the master's madness, an' got him out o' the house, an' then killed him. And then he'd say, 'If that ain't true, Joe, who knows if the old lady warn't in the right?' This 'ud make me angry, and I rather believe as the cause of the quarrel 'tween him an' my gal was my sayin' that he wur no man for strivin' to ruin the character of the mistress as paid him, an' had always been kind to him."

Saying this, he got up, emptied his teacup, wished us good-night, and walked out of the kitchen.

I stopped in the kitchen for the rest of the evening, preferring the company of the servants and the cheerful fire to the solitude of my room, where I very well knew the spectre of memory—the face I had looked at through the glass in the coffin—awaited me. The housemaid told me that the Colonel was with his daughter in her bedroom. They were talking over their future plans, no doubt; and, among other matters, I might now conclude that I was not likely to be housekeeper at Gardenhurst much longer. Mrs. Ransome must utterly abhor

the place by this time. Even I, who found a comfortable home in it, was growing very weary of its monotony. The estate itself was a little Paradise ; but pleasant places are not made by pleasant sights, but by pleasant associations. The house had been gloomy enough while Mr. Ransome inhabited it. The suspicions his disappearance engendered had made it a very dark and melancholy home indeed. It scarcely needed the discovery of the dead body, and the abundant gossip that would be excited by it, to make Gardenhurst intolerable to its possessors.

The cook and I talked over the probability of both of us, before long, being in search of new situations ; and then we passed in review all that had happened since I had been in the house, and conjectured as best we could Poole's motives in protesting that Mr. Ransome had been murdered ; and then by an easy transition we got upon the subject of the inquest, which set us talking of murders in general, while the housemaid entertained us with an account of the murder of a factory apprentice in the city she came from, which was so ghastly (related as

it was with demure unction, and much secret enjoyment of the perspiration it engendered), that I heartily sympathized with the cook's terrors, and looked forward with some apprehension to my usually lonesome job of locking up the house for the night.

When Sarah had taken up the hot water and glasses at ten o'clock, she told us that Mrs. Ransome was in the dining-room with her father. Hearing this I thought it my duty to go and inquire how she was. So I went upstairs. Certainly Mrs. Ransome looked very ill. The hollows under her eyes were quite livid, and contrasted painfully and disagreeably with the ashy paleness of the rest of her face. She was wrapped in a dressing-gown, and sat on a low chair before the fire; while her father, looking fagged to death and very nearly as ill as she, leaned back in an armchair opposite her, his hands folded on his breast, and his face full of deep and painful reflection.

I asked Mrs. Ransome if there was anything I could do for her before she went to bed.

"No, thank you ; there is nothing, Miss Ivory."

"I persuaded Mrs. Ransome to come downstairs," said the Colonel. "She has been in her bedroom nearly all day."

"I think Mrs. Ransome wants a change from this house altogether, sir," I exclaimed, impressed more and more, the longer I looked at her, by her forlorn, weakly, and broken-hearted aspect.

"She shall have a change before long, depend upon it," he answered, with sudden energy. "And the change shall be a permanent one, too."

"I am afraid you have eaten nothing to-day, madam."

"Very little ; but I shall feel better to-morrow, I hope," she replied. "I am going to bed in a few minutes. Will you tell Sarah to see to the fire in my room ?"

I attended to her request myself, and after I had heaped some coals on the grate, could not forbear gazing around the large and handsome apartment, and reflecting on the many strange events that had taken place since I first peeped into this room on my arrival at Gardenhurst. I recalled that

night when, from the bedroom overhead, I had heard the handle of a door turned, the tread of a footstep in the garden, the creak of the staircase on the landing. I recalled my astonishment on discovering next morning that both Mr. Ransome and the footman were missing. I recalled the long and tedious interval of suspense that had followed that discovery, and the supposed final solution of the mystery in the visit of Mr. Ransome to Gardenhurst. Who was that man? was he indeed Mr. Ransome? If so, how came my doubts of him? What grounds had Poole for his positive declaration that this man was not Mr. Ransome? And who was the dead man who had been unearthed from his resting-place under the trees?

As I asked myself these questions, as I reviewed the whole of the conflicting circumstances as they occurred to my mind, I felt that the mystery was darker than ever it had been before; that the very details which might seem to explain away the most puzzling portions of the enigma had, in reality, only more hopelessly complicated it. If the man that had been produced by the

Colonel *were* Mr. Ransome, where was he now? How was it, that amid the numerous conversations I had with the Colonel and his daughter during the fortnight, no reference to his whereabouts—no comment upon his extraordinary and final leave-taking—no conjecture as to his intentions—had ever escaped either of them? And where was Maddox that he was not to be found? The detection of the footman should have seemed an easier task than the detection of his master; for, in robbing the house, he had carried away many tokens of his guilt, through any of which the police might trace him.

A footstep startled me from the reverie into which I had fallen. I left the room, and met Mrs. Ransome coming upstairs, followed by her father. They wished me good-night as they passed, and I observed that as Mrs. Ransome turned the bend of the staircase, she threw a startled glance at the door of the room in which the body had been lodged. The mere existence of that room was now a horror in the house. The Colonel called to me when I was in the hall—

"Miss Ivory, I shall not come downstairs again. You can send the servants to bed, and lock up."

"Very well, sir," I replied.

I heard him go with his daughter into her bedroom. He was clearly very anxious about her.

Had I not secretly shared in the cook's fears, I should no doubt have found them comical enough. She was decidedly annoyed to hear that the Colonel had told me to send the servants to bed, declaring that in her last place the servants never went to bed before eleven; that for her part she didn't feel at all sleepy; that six hours' sleep was long enough for any body in health: all which meant that she was afraid to go upstairs. Grumbling, and starting at the shadows thrown by her candle, and peering earnestly ahead of her, she passed out of the kitchen, followed by Sarah, who nearly trod her down in her anxiety to keep close. Their footsteps died away, and I was left alone.

I was not so in love with the silence and loneliness of the lower part of the house at that moment as to care to loiter; accordingly,

I lighted my candle, and locked up the basement, after raking out the fire in my room. This done, I went upstairs and bolted the hall-doors, and went into the dining-room to see to the fastenings of the windows. I was so used to this last duty of my everyday's work that I went about it quite mechanically. I directed my steps to the drawing-room, meaning to extinguish the hall-lamp as I went upstairs. The small flame of my candle barely pierced the gloom of the large room, darkened yet by its sombre drapery, the velvet curtains, the dark walnut furniture, the chocolate-coloured carpet. The atmosphere was raw and nipping. Colder it could scarcely have been had all the windows been wide open. My impression was that one of the windows *was* open.

I placed the candle on the table, and walked to the window facing the door. That was fastened; so was the next. I went to the others facing the terrace.

Through them—not a window in the house had shutters—I saw the grounds stretching palely beyond the pillars of the terrace—a blank surface of snow gathering depth even as I watched from the flakes

which thickened the air. The snow aided by the moon, whose light was not to be eclipsed though her orb was hidden, made a species of twilight in which even objects some distance off were visible. The near bushes, whitened atop, but their under-branches blackly marked upon the snow, resembled human beings; nor was it difficult, by keeping the eye fixed on them, to imagine that they moved.

I had halted a moment before the first window overlooking the terrace. I now passed to the second. But scarcely had I looked through it, when I shrieked and recoiled. Staring in through it, in a crouching posture, so as to see into the room through the curtains, which were festooned off at the point where his eyes were, was the figure of a man. I could not distinguish his face; the candle was too far off to reflect its light upon him; nothing but his outline, sharply defined against the snow, which formed the background, was perceptible.

I stood for a moment rooted to the floor, my mouth dry, my heart beating wildly, my whole body struck motionless by the

sudden terror caused me by this unexpected apparition. In that moment the figure motioned with his hand ; the gesture acted upon me like a shock of galvanism. Swiftly as my legs could carry me I fled from the room, and bounded up the stairs.

I knocked furiously at the Colonel's bedroom door, but elicited no answer ; but in a moment or two Mrs. Ransome's bedroom door was opened, and the Colonel came out. Within I saw Mrs. Ransome seated before the fire.

"What is the matter, Miss Ivory?" asked the Colonel.

"There is a man on the terrace, sir," I answered, breathlessly. "He is looking through the drawing-room window."

"Where is your candle?"

"I left it burning in the drawing-room."

He hurried downstairs. I followed him, taking courage from his presence, and eager to show him where the man had been, in case he should be gone. I heard Mrs. Ransome call to me, but would not stay to answer her. My belief was that the man was Poole. The Colonel had snatched a stick from the hat-stand, and had passed

through the drawing-room when I entered ; he was in the act of opening the terrace window.

"Be on your guard, sir," I cried ; "there may be more than one."

"Let there be a dozen," he answered, "some of them shall find me tough enough, I promise. Bring the candle this way."

As he spoke he threw open the window and stepped out, grasping his stick with both hands. The bitter night air streamed in and sent shudder after shudder through me. The Colonel stood full in the window, a foot beyond it, looking steadily to the right ; and I heard him say—

"What are you doing there ?"

A voice answered. I did not catch the words, but the tone thrilled through me as though a voice had spoken from the grave.

The stick fell from the Colonel's hand ; he threw up his arms in a wild and unaccountable gesture.

"At last !" he cried. In another instant he had thrust forth his hands and whirled, with the strength of a giant, the man into the room. He had him by the collar ; he retained his hold for several moments, then

let go. The man's arms hung idly by his side. The Colonel fell back a step, and they looked at each other without speaking.

Fifteen days before, dating from that very night, the man I now looked at was supposed to have been at Gardenhurst. Fifteen days before this man had been young-looking, well-dressed, fresh and spruce as any careful buck of the age.

In a fortnight what had he become?

A ragged-faced, bearded, dishevelled madman, with eyes bloodshot, wild and famished; with features nipped and pinched and bloodless; with a gaze aimless and wandering, but sinister. Could a fortnight work such a change? This man I knew—knew him as I knew the man before whom he stood stirless in all but his eyes. This was the man who, many months ago, had left the house, whom some thought dead, whom some thought murdered—him, and no other, as surely as he who had confronted the four gentlemen in this very room fifteen days before was *not* Mr. Ransome!

What a sight!—how piteous!—how broken!—how unspeakably changed!

He was kept at bay by the Colonel's

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eyes ; but if ever madness, desperate and hunted, restrained for the moment, but waiting its opportunity, was embodied, it stood there.

The Colonel's self-possession was extraordinary ; the passion that had burned in him on his discovering who this intruder was, had given way before the tragically wretched aspect the man presented. There would, indeed, have been something unworthy in anger in the presence of such a creature as this ; whom, when the first shock of amazement had passed from me, I could not behold without compassion. To all appearance frozen by the cold, he yet seemed insensible to the sufferings it must have caused him. His clothes were thin, and scarcely fitted to protect the body from the chill even of a spring night. They were, moreover, soiled and worn and travel-stained. His beard was short and curly, but obviously the growth of many weeks. His hair was long and (he had removed his hat when the Colonel had released him, and there was something indescribably touching in this purely mechanical act of courtesy) fell in tangled curls about his forehead.

He never looked either at the Colonel or me, but glanced round the room, and frequently in the direction of the door.

The silence was broken by the Colonel. He had been looking at him fixedly, and now said—

“What do you want here at this hour?”

“I have come to see my wife,” he replied, and as he made this answer he looked at me momentarily and smiled.

“You choose a strange hour to return to her. You have been more than half a year away. Where have you been all this time?”

The Colonel asked these questions quite calmly. But he looked at the man as he would look at a hound who might fly at his throat if he averted his eye.

“I will tell my wife where I have been and why I left her. Let me see her.”

“You cannot see her now. To-morrow, perhaps. Where do you come from? are you stopping at Copsford?”

“I am stopping nowhere. I have my fancies, and I go where they lead me.” He looked downwards with a smile and added, “Am I not well-dressed enough to see my

wife ? If not, let me go to my room. I have clothes there."

He addressed himself to me ; that is, with his face turned in my direction, but with his eyes on the floor. " And I can shave also, and wash myself. I can shave by candle-light. She'll know me then."

The Colonel glanced at me. He was, obviously, for the moment, at a loss to know how to act. The flame of the candle I held was waved to and fro by the draught from the open window. He noticed this rather than the bitter cold of the night air, and desired me to close the window. I put the candle down and turned to obey his order. Mr. Ransome took the candle in his hand.

"I know where my room is and where my wife sleeps," he said, with a strange mixture of courtesy and cunning in his manner. "Do not trouble to accompany me."

He made a step towards the door. The Colonel seized his arm and took the candle from him.

"I have told you that you cannot see your wife to-night," he said ; "if you are

in want of a lodging, I will accompany you to Copsford and obtain one for you."

The man stood stock-still, looking irresolutely and with the expression I well remembered from the door to the ground, over and over again.

"I have my sleeping-places and can find them without help," he said, after a short pause. "I have come to see my wife. You cannot prevent me from seeing her, sir. She is lawfully my wife, and I claim the right to see her."

He raised his voice, and there were symptoms of irritation in his subdued but rapid gestures. I noticed that he put his hand to his breast and kept it there a moment.

The perfectly sane manner in which he spoke, threw the Colonel off his guard.

"You dare not say that you have the right to see your wife. You deserted her many months ago, and by so doing have forfeited your claims as a husband. You have brought misery and shame upon her and me! Coward!—beware! do not anger me. I have many wrongs to avenge—do not force me to recur to them at this moment."

His eyes shone, he clenched his fist, and advanced a step as though awaiting or provoking an excuse to strike. I trembled from head to foot. His passion seemed to transform him into a figure of iron. I transferred my gaze to the nerveless, attenuated madman, and felt that let him give but a sign and I should witness him prostrate and bleeding on the ground.

The wretched creature's hand again sought his breast, and he glanced towards the door.

It opened at that moment, opened wide, and Mrs. Ransome stood on the threshold. I heard the madman shriek ; I saw him spring towards her. The Colonel was after him like a flash of light ; a pistol-shot rang through the room ; and while the echoes of the report still reverberated, both men were on the ground locked in a deadly struggle.

I stood for a moment transfixed, and then rushed forward. Mrs. Ransome kept her place in the doorway. In the gloom I could not for a moment or two tell which man was undermost ; but when I had approached close, I beheld the Colonel kneeling on Mr. Ransome's breast, both hands upon his throat. The madman's face was livid with

strangulation ; there was foam upon his lips, white and thick ; his arms beat the floor ; his eyes were upturned and showed the whites with horrid effect against the dusky skin in which they were set.

“ You will kill him ! ” I shrieked, and looked imploringly at Mrs. Ransome ; but she resembled a grand image of stone motionlessly gazing down upon the shocking spectacle.

“ You will kill him, sir ! ” I shrieked again ; and in my agony and misery I could have thrown myself upon the men and plucked those remorseless fingers from the choking throat.

“ Fetch me a rope—quick ! ” cried the Colonel ; never shifting his attitude, swaying only to the movements of the tortured body he was strangling.

There was a box-cord in the pantry. I had seen it there that morning. I rushed into the hall, groped my way downstairs, felt for and found the cord, and returned with it.

The madman lay still enough. I thought he was dead. The Colonel let go his hold of the wretch's throat to take the line. But

no sooner had he raised his hands than Mr. Ransome gave a twist, dislodged the Colonel, gained his feet, and rushed towards his wife. She fled to her father with a wild and pealing cry, eluding by a hair's breadth the outstretched hands of the madman. In a moment he was down again, felled by a blow that brought him to the earth like a log; and with marvellous rapidity and presence of mind the Colonel was winding the cord round and round him.

He stood up when his task was done, breathless and panting. Mrs. Ransome cowered near him.

"Are you hurt?" he asked her, gasping out his words.

"No," she answered.

"Miss Ivory, I dare not leave this man. You must go to Copsford, and procure help."

"Yes, sir;" and I was preparing to leave the room when the madman began to plunge. His efforts to liberate himself from his bonds were frightful to witness. He kept his eyes on his wife, and wrestled madly with his arms, sometimes getting on to his knees, and then falling backwards or for-

wards as the case might be, cursing and blaspheming, and plunging amid such cries as might fitly issue from the lips of the damned. He was raving mad now, and with his discoloured face and flaming eyes formed a picture the awfulness of which I cannot believe was ever paralleled.

"Away with you, Miss Ivory!" cried the Colonel. "If you are afraid to go alone, waken the other servants, and make them accompany you."

"I am not afraid to go alone, sir."

And as I made this answer, I hastened out of the room. In less than five minutes I was equipped in cloak and bonnet, and toiling through the deep snow.

I was not above a dozen yards away from the house, when I was brought to a stand by the sound of a second pistol-shot, instantly followed by a scream. My momentary belief was that the man had actually accomplished the object which manifestly had brought him to the house, by shooting his wife. Faint with fear and horror I staggered back to the house. The door of course was closed. I rang furiously, waited, rang again and yet again. Had my ears

deceived me? Was the shot I had heard but the echo ringing in my head of the first shot that had been fired in the drawing-room?

Hark! footsteps came quickly along the passage: the door was opened.

"Who is that?" demanded the voice of the Colonel.

"I, sir. Has Mrs. Ransome been shot?"

"No. Come this way—see for yourself."

The passage and anteroom were in pitch darkness; I groped my way after him, and gained the hall, where the lamp burned brilliantly, and followed into the drawing-room.

I saw what had happened quickly enough. Mr. Ransome had succeeded in liberating his right arm from the rope in which the Colonel had bound him; twisted along the floor to where the pistol with which he had aimed at his wife had fallen, and shot himself with it. He lay on his left side, stone dead, with a dark spot over the right temple.

Mrs. Ransome was in a swoon, upon the floor, with the two pale and horrified servants whom the pistol-shots had brought

from their beds, busy about her. One of them had brought a candle, and this helped the illumination of the candle I had myself left in the drawing-room. But both of them together shed but a very imperfect light, and the strange and shocking tragedy seemed to borrow not a little of its ghastliness from the gloom that lowered sullenly in the large room.

"He had shot himself," said the Colonel to me in a whisper, "before I could raise my hand. He was bellowing one moment, and then he was still; and I went to my daughter, meaning to conduct her, past him, out of the room. But scarcely had I turned my back, when the shot was fired. My daughter screamed, and fainted. I thought he had killed her. I rushed back, and saw that he had shot himself. Look at him. He still holds the pistol, do you see? it is double-barrelled—observe that! There is no doubt that he meant to kill her first, and then himself."

"Is he dead, sir?" I asked, trembling violently.

"Dead? Ay! would you wish it otherwise? You need not linger. Go, and ring

the Inspector up, and tell him what has happened. The end has come, indeed! You told me you were not afraid to walk alone—are you? Both those women shall accompany you if you wish.”

He was almost wild with excitement, and gasped out his words in the strangest manner.

“I will go, sir, at once.”

“I dare not leave the body, for fear that it should be disturbed,” he continued, walking with me to the door. “His attitude as he lies dead there proves suicide. That hand of his clutching the pistol bears witness to the doer of this deed. Do you understand me? Murder has been talked of for a long while. He must not be touched. Let the Inspector find him as he is. The villain is his own witness now. Lose no time, Miss Ivory.”





THE COLONEL'S STORY

(Concluded).

I.



TAKE up the thread of the story at the point where Miss Ivory begins her second instalment—namely, on the day on which I quitted Gardenhurst for London, in obedience to the letter of the detective, Johnson, whose positive declaration that he had found Mr. Ransome left me in no doubt of the success of his quest.

That letter had found me hopeless. Over and over again I had patiently pondered every chance that was in the least likely to occur to remove from my daughter's character the stain that Mrs. Ransome's accusation had left upon it. I had advertised in the then most popular prints, offering a large reward for the discovery of the man whose description I gave. I had

set to work one Mathewson, the same who had given me information respecting the writer of the letter signed "Justitia," to make patient and diligent inquiry, not only in Copsford, but throughout the neighbourhood, after the two missing men. I had offered, through the Inspector, a reward to any of the constables under him who should bring me information regarding either Mr. Ransome or Maddox.

In vain. My advertisements were unanswered. My Copsford emissary could obtain no clue of any kind, though he questioned the country people far and wide. The Inspector never had any news to give me. And, worse than all, my London man, Johnson, in whom I had lodged all my hopes, remained silent.

My depression at times was overwhelming. In a sense I became a monomaniac. My mind refused to admit any other thought but the one question—How was this mystery to be solved? My imagination grew intolerably morbid. Miserable misgivings possessed me, the darkest of which was a suspicion of my daughter. I own that there were times when it seemed to me

likely that she knew what had become of her husband. What could her resolute denials prove? Her protestations of innocence were inflamed with passion, and increased my fears. Her fierce allusions to her husband terrified me, as the delirium of guilt rendered callous by hate and rage. There was another consideration that staggered me—the haughty and contemptuous intrepidity with which she had at first encountered my suspicions. I never thought of referring this attitude to the indignation and pride of conscious innocence.

I could scarcely credit my senses when I received Johnson's letter. But the summons to London was peremptory, and, as you have read, I lost no time in obeying it.

The day was a detestable one: wet, windy, and depressing to the last degree. At Copsford I hired a post-chaise, which took me to L—— at a gallop, and I was just in time to catch the up-coach. I remember that journey as clearly as I remember anything: the wet and hazy landscape, the damp, silent passengers, the deserted streets of the town through which we passed, the gloomy and humid coffee-room in which we dined, our

entry into London, with the yellow lights shining through the fog.

It was half-past seven. Johnson, who had calculated the hour at which the coach would arrive, had appointed to meet me at a coffee-house in the Strand. A church-clock was striking eight when the fly that had brought me from Southwark set me down at the house.

Johnson waited for me in a private room behind the bar. He was a thin, undersized man, with a pale, inflexible face, iron-grey eyebrows, small whiskers, and a steady, resolute manner. He had for many years followed the queer profession of hunting down people and hunting up evidence, and had been recommended to me by the Copsford solicitor as singularly keen, patient, and sagacious.

"Good evening, sir," said he. "You have had a cold ride to London. Never remember this month so wintry before."

"I had given up all hope of ever hearing from you," I replied.

He smiled, dropped his mouth on one side, and suggested that something hot would do me good after my journey. He

also suggested that something hot would do him good after his waiting. His taste led him to boiling hot rum and lemon peel. Our wants having been supplied, he routed the fire into a blaze, took a chair on one side of it, and without more ado related his story. That story he conveyed with very remarkable brevity, by the simple means of omitting half the words another man would have used, and by relating only the actual facts of it.

It was to this effect:—

Unknown to me, he had begun his inquiries by stopping at Copsford for two days. By this sojourn he gained nothing. So he set to work to beat the neighbourhood. A man answering to Mr. Ransome's description had been seen to pass along the road leading to Sandwell a few days before; he followed, called at every inn and tavern in the place, but obtained no tidings. He travelled to the next town, and there procured information that led him further north. He had, he believed, lighted on the track of Mr. Ransome, and the one or two stories he told me of his manner of making inquiries astounded me by

the cunning and cleverness they illustrated.

Step by step he traced the man through half a dozen towns and villages, and finally landed himself at Guildford, having in his progress made the circuit of two counties.

It only remained for him to find out the house in which Mr. Ransome had put up. But this took him a whole day. The house was a mean tavern, up a back street. But the discovery was made a day too late. The landlord positively declared that the gentleman who, he said, had called himself a Guildford man, but whom he had never seen before, and who, in his opinion, was mad, had left that morning for London, having slept one night in his house.

I had explained to Johnson the nature of the suspicions that were entertained against Phœbe ; and he would therefore have known, by communicating the news, that Mr. Ransome was alive, that those suspicions must fall dead. But he was too slow and careful a man to report on hearsay evidence only. He could never imagine that it would have infinitely relieved *my* misgivings of Phœbe to learn that Mr. Ransome was living, for

the reason that he had no notion that I questioned my daughter's innocence. I had informed him that there was no chance of obtaining my daughter's acquittal at the hands of public opinion until Mr. Ransome was found and produced; and so, until Mr. Ransome *was* found, he saw no end to be gained by writing to me.

At the booking-office of the coach he substantiated the landlord's information by the testimony of the book-keeper, who stated that the man described had started for London by the coach that morning.

There was nothing to do then but follow Mr. Ransome to London. He admitted that the quest took the aspect of a difficult and chance affair, now that it was to be pushed in a metropolis in which the hiding-places were as numerous as the population.

Many weeks passed of which he offered no account. He might wish me to suppose that he had been vigilant and active all this time; and doubtless he was, as the sequel showed.

He was walking up Oxford Street one night, when there passed him a man whom

he instantly turned and followed. The light of a street lamp had disclosed a face which seemed to correspond in every particular with the description he had received of Mr. Ransome. The man went as far as the Tottenham Court Road, where he entered a chophouse, and supped. He then came out, walked up Oxford Street, and turned into Berners Street. When halfway advanced along the street he stopped before a house and admitted himself with a latch-key.

Johnson watched this man for several days and nights running. He discovered that he never emerged in the daytime; that his regular hour for sallying forth was about half-past ten at night, and that his object for so sallying forth was for no more sinister purpose than to obtain some supper and some exercise.

Such habits, coupled with the striking resemblance of the man to Mr. Ransome, would naturally confirm Johnson in his theory, that his long search was ended at last. But he was too cautious to form conclusions by what he saw only. He boldly presented himself at the house, and had an interview with the landlady, whom he

easily pledged to secrecy, by representing that her lodger was a man of fortune, who had run away from his friends, and that, if she would help him to restore the gentleman, who was eccentric, to his home, she might depend upon receiving a reward. By this means he learnt that the lodger had been four months in the house; that he went under the name of Cleveland; that she was positive that was not his real name; that he was singular in his habits; that she could not tell where he came from; and she finally ended by informing Johnson that, from what he had told her, she had not the least doubt her lodger was the person he was in search of.

Such was Johnson's story, the whole of which was conveyed in about ten minutes, in brief, dry monosyllables, whilst he sipped his rum-and-water, and aired his legs at the fire.

"And now, what is to be done?" I asked.

"You must see him."

"Certainly. At his lodgings?"

"No; he'll sup to-night in Tottenham Court Road. He has three cookshops, and he takes 'em in turns. We'll go there, and

you shall have a look at him through the glass door, when the time comes."

"What time?"

"Eleven o'clock."

I was in the humour to witness nothing inconsistent with the part I deemed this madman capable of playing, in any piece of personal information about him that Johnson could tell me of. That he should sup fur- tively at low cookshops was in nowise more surprising than that he should run away from his home, and hide himself in London and elsewhere, for no other reason than because he was mad.

The long time Johnson and I had to wait before the hour for repairing to Tot- tenham Court Road arrived could not be more fitly employed than by our ordering and eating a supper. I was in a high state of excitement, and was perfectly satisfied by the answers Johnson made to my num- berless inquiries, that the man he had dis- covered was Mr. Ransome. He was equally confident, and in great spirits, which he expressed by a fixed and cunning smile, and numerous winks and odd ironical eja- culations.

The coffee-house in which we supped was a very respectable house, and since I was in it I thought I might as well sleep there as anywhere else. I therefore ordered a bedroom to be got ready, and a fire lighted ; and having made this arrangement for passing the night, prepared to accompany Johnson to Tottenham Court Road.

He had watched his man long enough to count with security upon the regularity of his habits ; but of course, he told me, he could not guarantee that the man would be at the chop-house at eleven, or at any other hour that night. We must take our chance ; under any circumstances he could certainly procure me a view of the man next day.

The night was a cheerless one, raw and foggy, slushy under foot, thick and black overhead. The flyman chose those intricate and grimy streets which lie between Holborn and the Strand ; and in some of them the only signs of life and light visible came from the public-house, where, as we rattled past, I might catch a glimpse of a white-faced, hungry-looking crowd, assembled round the bar, and a woman or two outside in the

street waiting, and presently overtake a drunkard reeling to his home.

It was ten minutes to eleven when we alighted at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. I told the driver to wait, and went with Johnson up the street. On the right, a few minutes' walk from the corner, was a little chop-house—low pitched, with a couple of shelves in its window, upon which were displayed to the best advantage such eatables as the proprietor might think would best attract customers. The glass entrance-door was closed. Johnson stepped up to it, and looked through, came back to me, and said, "He's not there yet."

I pulled my shawl well about my mouth and ears, and with Johnson at my side twice took the turn of the pavement, from where the fly stood to the chop-house. I had plenty of patience, and was ready to wait as long as Johnson should think necessary.

We were returning, with our faces directed up the pavement, when a man passed us, walking quickly, going the same way with ourselves.

Johnson pulled my sleeve.

"There he is," he exclaimed.

I stepped out briskly; but before I could get near enough to enable me to see his face he turned into the chop-house.

"Go to the door, sir, and look at him," said Johnson.

I went close to the glass, and peered through it; while Johnson remained outside. The man stood at the counter waiting to address the shopman, who was attending to an old man at a side table. The interior of the shop was well lighted, and I waited with indescribable anxiety for the man to turn his head. He was dressed in a thick topcoat, dark trousers, and a low-crowned, broad-brimmed hat—fashionable at the time for country wear—and such as I had myself seen on Mr. Ransome at Gardenhurst.

During some moments he kept his face turned away, so that I could only see the back of his head; but he presently looked round, with an impatient gesture, and I saw Mr. Ransome! him, as I remembered him at Broadstairs, cleanly-shaved, long-jawed, the moustache long on the upper-lip, the eyes black!

In the conviction that possessed me that

this was the man, I could have rushed forward and seized him, so fierce was the sudden passion the sight of him excited in me. Johnson unconsciously restrained me by a whisper.

“Is he the man you want?”

“Yes,” I answered, so agitated that I could scarcely articulate.

“You are quite sure, sir?”

I looked at the man again.

He kept his hat on. I wished that he would remove it. Beyond all possibility of delusion the resemblance was too startling for me to conceive it an accident. There was indeed something wanting in the attitude, something wanting in the movements of the body—for he was now speaking to the shopman—which would have dissatisfied me there and then but for the overwhelming impression produced by the face. It was long since I had seen Mr. Ransome. I had to date my recollection of him virtually from my acquaintance with him at Broadstairs ; for my visit to Gardenhurst, when he was there, had been short, and my impressions confused by my anxiety and the discomforts of my brief stay.

"If I could hear him speak," I whispered, "I should be more satisfied."

"Impossible now, sir," replied Johnson. "If he should see you, it's ten to one if on going to his lodgings to-morrow we shouldn't find him bolted. Come away if you please. I'll tell you my plans as we go along."

I walked with him to the fly, and we started for the Strand. His plans were simple enough. He would call for me at ten o'clock next morning and accompany me to Berners Street. The landlady, on my telling her that her lodger was the man I sought, would take me to him, heedless of the injunction he had given her to admit no one who asked to see him. This had been arranged between her and Johnson. It was best that I should have my interview with Mr. Ransome alone. Johnson would remain downstairs. I should have to use my own judgment in dealing with the man; but if he refused to show himself at Copsford, I must then take measures to obtain conclusive testimony to his being alive.

I bade Johnson good-night at the door of the coffee-house, and he walked away

towards Charing Cross. Wearied by my journey and the excitement of the day, I called for a candle and went to bed ; but not to sleep for a long while after I had extinguished the light. The windows of my bedroom overlooked the Strand, and the incessant clattering of the vehicles passing to and fro over the stones, until my ears got used to the noise, kept sleep banished as effectually as if a drummer had been stationed in the room. I heard the unfamiliar chimes of the church-clocks striking about me ; and the murmur of voices in the room overhead and next door. Moreover my bedroom was small, stuffy, and oppressively furnished with curtains which loaded the bed and loaded the windows and made breathing a matter of calculation and labour.

But I should have fared no better, as respected rest, had I occupied my room at Gardenhurst. The one question that engrossed me was—was the man I had seen Mr. Ransome ? Had I dared to own the truth to myself I should have answered in the negative. It had been Mr. Ransome's face—his height—his figure : but with something missing : a subtle something my

memory was powerless to define though it felt the want.

But my doubt of his identity would involve too overwhelming a disappointment, too heavy a shock to the hopes on whose fulfilment I had counted with reckless and determined confidence to suffer me to admit it. I reasoned, that in the time during which the man had been absent from his home, he had changed ; he might be less mad ; the eccentric life upon which he had voluntarily entered might have modified by conditions of its own, which I could not guess, the characteristics of movement, of glance, of attitude, which I seemed to remember in my daughter's husband, and which I had missed in the man Johnson had taken me to see. In the months which had elapsed since I had last beheld him, his insanity might have sobered and wrought the subtle change which baffled and frightened me. I ought to have managed somehow to hear his voice. Johnson should have suffered me to linger a little while longer at the door to observe if he removed his hat. Had I been permitted to obtain more evidence of the man's

identity by a longer observation of him, I should have been spared the miserable and tormenting hours of suspense which found me sleepless even after the dawn had brightened on the window-blinds.

I was up and dressed by nine, and had finished breakfast when Johnson arrived. The streets were still full of fog, amid which hung the sun, a copper-coloured ball. My morning's reflections had deepened my misgivings that the man we were about to visit was not the man I wanted ; but I did not express my fears to Johnson.

"We'll stop at the corner of the street," he said, as we entered a fly. "If we drove up to the door the sound of the wheels might make him look out of the window. He mustn't see you. Stand well in the door when you've knocked."

"Am I to ask for Mr. Cleveland?"

"Yes, and give your name. The landlady'll know who you are then."

No more was said. I was greatly excited, nervous, and apprehensive. I felt miserably depressed when I considered that the man might not prove Mr. Ransome. For in that case what conclusions could I form ? what

conclusions hostile to Phoebe must follow the reflection that for many weeks a shrewd and unwearying detective had been seeking after the missing man without avail? Should I have to conclude that Mr. Ransome was out of the country? or that he was dead? or that he had been murdered? If we were on the wrong track the problem would yet remain to be solved.

We alighted at the corner of Berners Street and dismissed the fly. When we had walked a short distance, Johnson said, "Yonder's the house. Go and knock boldly, and keep well to the door."

I did as he bade me whilst he walked leisurely forwards, looking across the street away from the house that his face might not be seen. He returned when the door was opened.

"I wish to see Mr. Cleveland," I said to the woman, whom I judged and soon discovered to be the landlady. "My name is Colonel Kilmain."

She looked hard at me, caught sight of Johnson, smiled, and asked me to walk in.

Johnson followed me into the hall.

"Is he up?" he asked.

"Yes, having breakfast," answered the woman.

"Better walk up at once, sir," said Johnson, interrupting me as I was about to ask the landlady some questions. "I'll stop here. Just direct the gentleman, missis."

Although I had formed no plan of action, I followed the woman upstairs, having very little doubt that if the man turned out to be Mr. Ransome I should soon find out what to do. We went up three flights of stairs, and the landlady halting on the landing, pointed to the door on the right, and said in a whisper—

"You had best walk straight in, sir ; for if he should guess who you are, he might turn the key, and then there'd be no chance of getting at him at all."

Saying which she went downstairs, whilst I walked to the door, beat an apologetic rap with my knuckles and entered quickly.

I found myself in a bedroom. Up in a corner stood a gloomy fourposter, and near the door was a chimney with a small fire burning in the grate and a little kettle singing on the fire. A round table had been

pushed to the window, and on it was an apology for a white tablecloth, furnished with a plate, a cup, a loaf of bread, an egg, and a teapot.

At this table was seated the gentleman whom I had viewed through the glass door of the chop-house, breakfasting, in his shirt-sleeves, unshaved, collarless, and with his unbrushed hair so exact a counterpart of Mr. Ransome's, that for a moment or two I stood motionless, persuaded that my daughter's husband was before me.

He looked at me with profound astonishment, turning slowly in his chair and letting fall the knife with which he was about to help himself to a slice of bread. Then jumping up, he exclaimed—

“Who the deuce are you, sir? and what do you want in my bedroom?”

His voice disillusioned me in a second. Had he undergone a bodily transformation I should not more certainly have known that he was not the man I wanted.

Perhaps in some small measure I had anticipated the disappointment; but the blow was not the less prostrating. I felt

myself turn deadly pale, I breathed with difficulty and put my hand against the wall to steady myself.

He continued staring at me with unfeigned amazement. If he thought me mad, nothing could have been more just than his supposition.

"I apologize for this intrusion," I stammered. "I have been misled. This is a dreadful mistake."

"Have you come to see *me*?" he asked, taking me in from top to toe and eyeing me very suspiciously.

"No," I answered; "not you, but a man whom you closely resemble, named Ransome."

"My name is Cleveland," he exclaimed, quickly. "I gave orders to the landlady of this house not to admit anybody who asked for me."

"The whole thing," I replied, recovering a little of my composure, "is a mistake. I was so confident that you were Mr. Ransome that I did not scruple to intrude upon you. I beg, sir, that you will accept my most humble apology."

"Oh, no need to say that," he exclaimed,

softening as if by magic. "I see that you are disappointed and distressed. Pray sit and rest yourself."

I was about to decline to intrude upon him an instant longer when, struck anew by his startling resemblance to Mr. Ransome, an extraordinary thought entered my mind. It came upon me like an electric shock, terrifying me by its audacity and yet fascinating me too by its extreme practicability. I remained rooted to the ground whilst I watched him hurriedly slip on a collar and his coat; and then, breaking away from the spell in which my idea had bound me, I pulled a chair forwards and seated myself.

He had now made himself presentable and resumed his seat.

"You have no need to make any apologies," he said, after keeping his eyes fixed on me for some time in expectation of being addressed; "and there is no necessity to explain unless you want to do so. I see that this is a mistake, though it's a rather curious one, isn't it?"

"So curious," I replied, "that I should not feel justified in quitting this room until

I had satisfied you that I am the victim of an extraordinary error and a most bitter disappointment. Can you spare me ten minutes ? Or if you should wish to be alone, will you allow me to call upon you in the course of the day at any hour you may name ?”

“You don’t trespass,” he answered ; “I was just finishing my breakfast. Will you have a cup of tea ?”

I thanked him, and he poured some tea into a cup, which he took from the mantel-shelf. His manner was wonderfully cool and easy. When silent, his resemblance to Mr. Ransome was extraordinary : but when he spoke, his voice and the expressions which entered his face, modified the likeness. The essential difference between the two men lay in the eyes. This man’s were black, but clear ; but Mr. Ransome’s were dusky, not brilliant, and the irids tinged the whites.

I was about to begin my story when I recollected that Johnson waited below. It was manifest that if the plan I was now fully resolved to submit to Mr. Cleveland (as I must henceforth call him) was to be carried.

out, Johnson must not guess that we had mistaken the man. I therefore explained that I had left a companion in the hall, whom I did not wish to keep waiting, and with an apology for quitting the room I hastened downstairs, taking care to leave my hat behind me, that he might know I should return. When I reached the second landing, I leaned over the banisters and called to Johnson, who was seated on a hall chair, sucking the top of his stick.

He looked up.

"It's all right," I said; "you need not stop. Call at the coffee-house to-night at nine."

"Right you are, sir," he answered, nodded coolly, walked to the hall door and let himself out. Of course, if I was satisfied he was. He had, he considered, done the work for which I had hired him, and had nothing more to do but take his money.

I returned to the bedroom, repeating my apology for having left it, and begging Mr. Cleveland to have a little patience, as I would presently explain to him who this man was I had dismissed. The feeling that Johnson was out of the house, somehow, increased my courage. I carefully shut the

door, and drawing a chair close to the table, began my story without further word of preface. There was little that I either softened or omitted. Every moment was confirming my resolution to use this man as an instrument for freeing my daughter from the suspicion of having murdered her husband; and I plainly perceived that my initial step must be to closely and faithfully relate every particular connected with Mr. Ransome's mysterious disappearance.

"And now, sir," I said, bringing my story to an end, "you understand the reason of this intrusion upon you, and the bitter disappointment the discovery that you are not the man the detective has been searching for causes me."

"Perfectly, I wish I were the man, for my own sake. Do you smoke? I can offer you some tobacco."

"Thank you, I have some cigars; will you take one?"

I handed him my case, he extracted a cigar and lighted it.

"Am I so very like Mr. Ransome," he asked, stretching himself backwards, and looking at me with a smile.

"So like that I could have sworn you were he when I saw you last night."

"But all the same, I can't think much of your detective's sharpness for bringing you up from the country before making sure that I was somebody else."

"You must remember," I answered, "that every inquiry he made appeared to corroborate the strong evidence of the likeness. You have been here four months."

"Yes, that's true."

"Your habits are—well, I must call them singular. You keep indoors all day—pray pardon me; I wish to show you the reasons for the detective being deceived."

"No offence," he exclaimed, coolly: "but how the deuce do you know that I have been here four months, and that I stop indoors all day?"

"Johnson got this information from the landlady—acting, you will understand, under the impression that you were Mr. Ransome."

"Ah! and what else did my landlady say?"

I should have been going too far to have asserted that the landlady had hinted his name was assumed. There was no direct

proof of that; moreover, his affairs could no longer be objects of my curiosity now. So I replied, that what I had told him was, I believed, the chief information Johnson had obtained from the landlady.

He smoked unconcernedly for some moments, and then glancing at me, exclaimed—

“Mr. Johnson might have got me into a mess. You have been very candid, and no harm can be done if I follow your example. My own story is not quite so tragical as Mr. Ransome’s—indeed, I am afraid it is dreadfully vulgar and commonplace. I am in hiding from my creditors.”

He laughed, and added, “What a good cigar this is! Smoking such tobacco recalls old times.”

“Are your debts heavy?”

“Pretty heavy. I would rather be here than in the Fleet. I’ll tell you a secret; I am waiting for a chance to get abroad.”

“I am going to ask you some questions, not out of curiosity, but for a motive I will presently explain. My difficulty is heavier than yours. We can help each other. If you will extricate me, I will extricate you.

You speak of getting abroad. Where do you wish to go?"

"America."

"Have you no friends in this country who will help you?"

"I have tired the governor out," he replied, flipping his cigar-ash over the carpet. "I dare not even write to him, for he has sworn in the last letter he sent to give my address to my creditors if I apply to him for money again."

"What money do you require to carry you abroad?"

"I could do with two hundred. I have written twice to a screw of an uncle, and got a letter this morning from him enclosing ten pounds. What's the use of ten pounds? I can't begin life on that. And if the bailiffs nab me I'm done for; there's not a relative but would rather see me dead in jail than advance the money I owe to get me out."

"I'll give you two hundred pounds if you'll do what I want."

He looked at me steadily a moment, sucked his cigar, expelled a thick cloud, and asked—"What?"

"If you'll personate Mr. Ransome for half an hour."

He whistled, laughed, looked grave, and said—

"What's the part, sir?—a ghost's?"

"I am perfectly serious," I answered, relieved by the levity with which he received the remark. I had expected a very different answer. "My daughter's character is at stake; a monstrous falsehood was started by her mother-in-law, and credited by heaps of persons living in our neighbourhood. I must deal with this lie by another lie; but a lie more honest, for it has for its object the vindication of an innocent and cruelly wronged woman—my only child! Will you help me?"

"I cannot answer offhand," he replied, growing nervous on a sudden. "I want the money, but I don't know whether I can earn it in this way. Do you mean to say that people who knew Mr. Ransome will believe I am he?"

"I will take care they do not find out their mistake."

"But what good will half an hour's acting do?"

I threw down my cigar, and rose in my agitation.

"I have not yet formed any plans," I responded, pacing the room: "The scheme I have suggested only occurred to me when I saw you just now. Will you let me call upon you at this hour to-morrow? I shall then have matured the plan, and will lay it before you complete."

"It is a perilous undertaking, isn't it?" he asked, taking the little kettle from the hob, where it was shooting a long volume of steam into the room.

"What peril there is," I answered, "is not likely to reach you. You can, if you choose, make arrangements to be on your way to America the day following your visit to Copsford."

"But wont somebody see with half an eye that I am *not* Mr. Ransome?" he exclaimed, stretching his legs before the fire, with a coat-tail over each arm.

"His mother is dead. My daughter will be in the secret. The very audacity of the scheme will diminish the likelihood of detection; and I'll take care that you are seen only by those who are not so familiar with

Mr. Ransome as to distinguish the difference between you."

"What are you going to do with the servants?"

"They shall not see you."

"You want me to go to Copsford, is it?"

"That will require consideration. I can only see dimly as yet how the thing is to be done; but it *is* to be done. Will this hour to-morrow suit you?"

"Yes, very well."

"You must not," I exclaimed, earnestly, "suffer yourself to be prejudiced against this undertaking until the matured scheme is placed before you."

"Look here," he answered, "if I should consent to do what you want, you must pledge me your word not to grow inquisitive about me, and try to find out my name, and where I came from, and who I am, and all that."

"I promise you, on my honour," I replied, perceiving now that the landlady was right, and that Cleveland was *not* his name.

"I want the money you offer, and don't mind lending you a hand to get your daughter out of her scrape. But just as we were

strangers to each other an hour ago, so we must be strangers to each other the moment the business is over; I go my way, and you go yours. Is that understood?" It was the one condition of the scheme I could have most wished to insist upon.

"Perfectly. I should have stipulated for this myself had I not feared that you might misconstrue my object."

"Very well, sir. Then I shall expect you here to-morrow morning at this hour."

In a few minutes I was walking briskly in the direction of the Strand.

II.

The fruits of the thoughts which engrossed me for the rest of the day will appear in the course of this chapter.

My motive in conceiving and executing this plot was to free my daughter from the suspicion of murder. If the extraordinary nature of the charge preferred against her by her mother-in-law be considered, the part I took in my efforts to meet and defeat it will, I am sure, lose in the opinion of

the reader something of the baseness that appears to belong to it. The discovery that Johnson had been deceived was a terrible shock to me, since it still left me haunted with the dark and miserable suspicion that Phoebe might yet prove to be concerned in the mysterious disappearance of her husband. If she were in any wise guilty of Mr. Ransome's death, then, in my opinion, the need of forcing the world to imagine her guiltless was all the more imperative. It is certain that had I been profoundly convinced of her innocence I should not have entertained the plot which I afterwards carried out. She had led a miserable life with Mr. Ransome. It was highly probable that malice, not less than conviction, was at the root of the charge which old Mrs. Ransome had made against her. Any deception, I hold, was warranted to defeat the terrible suspicion that was entertained against my child, and which, whatever might have been my own misgivings, I felt the world was bound to consider unjust and malevolent in the absence of certain proofs of guilt.

Of the man whom I proposed to make my

agent in this affair, I knew no more than what I have written. But in the interview I had had with him I had heard and seen enough to feel morally certain that, providing I could so arrange my scheme as to diminish the risk to the smallest possible compass, he would accept my offer. He was cool, devil-may-care, penniless, living in constant fear of a jail, at the bottom of the wheel indeed, and could fear nothing from the next revolution. Could I engage him in this undertaking, his secrecy was as essential to his own interests as to mine. Viewing him indeed from the most suspicious standpoint, I could discover nothing to apprehend from his treachery. My business was to secure his services. These obtained, I might guarantee Phœbe's absolution at the hands of public opinion.

There was no very wonderful coincidence in his resemblance to Mr. Ransome, considering the manner in which I had met him. For weeks and months Johnson had been searching for a man who should answer to the description of Phœbe's husband. That such a search should result in the discovery of a man very closely resembling

Mr. Ransome, was no great marvel, considering the countless multitudes among whom the search was prosecuted.

Johnson called at the coffee-house that night as I had directed him. The heaviest obligation of my scheme was the necessity it placed me under to tell falsehoods. But the obligation was a condition of the scheme, and not to be obviated.

I informed him that I had to call on "Mr. Ransome" next morning ; that I had represented the critical position in which his mysterious disappearance had placed my daughter ; and that I had no doubt he would keep the promise he had made me to accompany me to Copsford.

Johnson highly relished this satisfactory conclusion of his labours, and very naturally began to ask me some questions, which grew so embarrassing, that to end them I pulled out my cheque-book and wrote him a draft, under cover of which I was enabled to get rid of him, without his conceiving his dismissal sudden or odd. Before he left me he said, that if Mr. Ransome gave me any trouble, I was to let him know, and he

would undertake to oblige him to present himself at Copsford.

I slept but little that night; but the result of my long meditation was to supply me with a very perfect plan for carrying out my stratagem.

At the appointed hour next morning I repaired with a composed face, but a very agitated mind, to Berners Street, and was admitted by the landlady, who dropped a curtsey on seeing me.

As she was conducting me upstairs she stopped to ask me if her lodger was the gentleman I wanted. I held up my finger very seriously, and shook my head; from such vague signs she could draw any meaning that pleased her.

"I'm not to be forgotten, sir, Mr. Johnson said, if the lodger *is* the gentleman," she remarked.

"I'll remember you," I replied. And I may as well say here that I kept my promise; for after I returned to Gardenhurst I sent her ten pounds, which I considered was about as much as her services were worth.

Mr. Cleveland was fully dressed, and waited for me. I was greatly struck by his singular likeness to Mr. Ransome, which was more defined now that he was trimly habited. He bowed politely, and placed a chair for me near the little grate: then threw himself into his easy chair and asked me if I had matured my scheme.

"Fully," I replied, and inquired how it struck him now that he had had time to reflect over it.

He wanted to hear my plans before he answered that question.

The manner in which he said this fully persuaded me that he would consent, and merely dallied that he might make me believe he had scruples. Encouraged by this belief I unfolded my plans, which were as follow—

I was quite certain that, although Mr. Ransome had lived two years at Gardenhurst, he was little known to the Copsford people. For his habits were wayward: he was repeatedly absent from his home: in his walks he chose the country, and seldom the frequented paths of it.

It was my intention, I said, to summon

three or four witnesses to the house, men of position, whose word would be held conclusive. I had noted down four names, two of whom I knew were acquainted with Mr. Ransome, though it was impossible they could be so familiar with him that they should be able to detect an impostor in Mr. Cleveland. Curiosity, strengthened by the appeal I would make, would bring the other two to the house: and they were bound to assume the truth from the assurance of their colleagues.

The two gentlemen who knew Mr. Ransome were Mr. Skerlock and Mr. Hastings. The others, who if they knew him at all could only know him by sight, were Mr. Ledbury and Sir Anthony Lauder. If two out of the four attended the meeting I should be satisfied: but I should be better satisfied to have them all.

I proposed that Mr. Cleveland should accompany me to Peterham, where his very name would be unknown: for he might run a risk should he stop at Copsford. The interview should take place in the evening, and I would take care so to regulate the light in the room that his face should be

imperfectly beheld. This would require judgment on his part, but the ruse was practicable, and might be so adroitly managed as to escape the attention of the witnesses, who, having no suspicion of the plot, would find nothing to attract them in such minor details.

I told him that the only person of whom I stood in the least fear was Miss Ivory, the housekeeper: that was, if she should see him; but of this there was little danger, for I would take care that he was admitted by the housemaid, who had come to the house some time after Mr. Ransome had left it, and therefore did not know him; and that on the termination of the interview, which need not be protracted beyond a quarter of an hour at the very outside, I would myself conduct him to the hall door.

For the matter of the interview, it was imperative that he should say as little as he could. This I might manage by putting questions to him which would imply his intentions to the audience, while they would involve him in monosyllabic replies only. For instance, I would ask him if his reason for leaving the house was because he was

unhappy with his wife? And I would then demand if he still adhered to his resolution not to live with her again? Questions of this kind would convey the substance of the motives which I wished our auditors to believe had impelled Mr. Ransome to quit his home, without obliging him (Mr. Cleveland) to enter into any explanations himself. I submitted that the audacity of the scheme would insure its success; that my name stood so high that the witnesses would never dream I could lend myself to a scheme which people who had no sympathy with the extraordinary end for which I was working, would call dishonourable; and I wound up by appealing to his humanity to assist me in cleansing my daughter's name of the cruel and unjust stain that rested upon it.

There was no need for this appeal. I had seen in his face that his mind was made up before I had finished telling him my plans. But that final sentence of mine was a lucky stroke, for it enabled him to waive the money profit of the undertaking as a quite outside consideration, and to profess himself willing to help me because I had touched his feelings. This was ridiculous; but

I swallowed the absurdity with a grave face, thanked him cordially for his acquiescence, and said that I would put notes to the value of two hundred pounds in his hand when I conducted him out of the house after the interview.

Though the plot was ripe and my agent willing, I deemed it advisable to wait a day or two in London before returning to Gardenhurst, conceiving that a greater air of truth would attach to the undertaking if I afterwards stated that the reason of my stay in London was the difficulty I met with in prevailing upon "Mr. Ransome" to accompany me to his home. There was a perpetual reference in my thoughts to Miss Ivory, whose sagacity I had learned to respect. I was, indeed, so afraid that she would discover the imposition, that all manner of schemes for obviating this risk entered my head. Sometimes I made up my mind to discharge her; but abandoned the intention when I considered its heartlessness, and recalled the obligations Phoebe was under to her. Then I thought of sending her away on a holiday; but feared the conclusions she would draw when she

afterwards learnt that I had brought Mr. Ransome to the house in her absence. Then I thought of taking her into my confidence, and leaving it to her to acquit or condemn me for my guilty efforts on behalf of my child; but the notion of such candour alarmed me. In truth, my fortitude was great enough to carry me through the commission of a wrong, but was not yet equal to the task of confessing it.

I therefore adhered to my original arrangement, of so contriving the interview that none but those who were invited as witnesses should see the representative of the missing man.

Before I could take Mr. Cleveland to Peterham, it was necessary that I should see Phoebe. I would gladly have been spared the ordeal of obtaining my child's connivance at a discreditable plot. This, indeed, was the hardest trial of all—harder even than the pitiful and humbling necessity my scheme forced upon me, of speaking falsehoods, and acting the liar's part.

On the fourth day, dating from my departure from home, I returned to Gardenhurst.

I had been with Mr. Cleveland every day, had had long conversations with him, had instructed him to the utmost heights of my memory in the character he was to enact, but found, by his not choosing to understand my motive for lingering in London, that he was impatient to get through the play, and obtain the reward.

I considered this a useful state of mind which must not be toyed with; and therefore, to lose no time, ordered the fly that carried me from Copsford to wait at Gardenhurst, that I might be able to catch the coach and be in London again that night.

The cause of my having to repeat these wearisome journeys, was Mr. Cleveland's steadfast refusal to quit his hiding-place until I had gained my daughter's consent to the scheme.

That consent was yet to be gained.

Miss Avory received me at the door. I hurried past her, and found my daughter in the drawing-room. The fly was waiting; it gave me an excuse for despatch; and I lost no time in telling her my scheme. She was thunderstruck, terrified, indignant by turns; if the scheme were discovered,

would not (she wanted to know) her guilt appear conclusive on the mere evidence of the stratagem I employed to clear her? I replied, that if I had the smallest fear that the scheme *would* be discovered, I would not attempt it. I represented to her that either her husband was dead, or hiding in some distant country, and that there was little or no chance of her ever hearing of him again; that unless he could be proved to have been alive after his disappearance from the house, her guilt would remain a permanent assumption in the minds of those who believed old Mrs. Ransome's accusation; that if this suspicion were not effectually removed by any means, base or honourable, her position would grow more critical as time progressed; for the murmurs of the gossips were not to be silenced. The attention of the law might be directed to her, and any day might witness her arrest on no better evidence than the persistent suspicion of the neighbours—a suspicion the durability of which might cause even humane and upright men to regard the disappearance of her husband as significant and worthy of inquiry.

In spite of these arguments, which perfectly expressed the reasons that moved me to this undertaking, she remained obstinately opposed to the scheme, until my anger was aroused, and I swore that if she refused to help herself by helping me, I would leave the house and never see her again.

This threat, which I was quite in the temper to carry out, frightened her into submission. I thereupon hurriedly acquainted her with the arrangements I had made to bring about the interview, exhorted her to be on her guard against Miss Avory's inquisitiveness, and left the house, after having addressed the few words to Miss Avory in the library which she has mentioned in her narrative.

This confession need not go much further. The story of the scheme has already been related. I merely undertook in this place to show how it originated and the manner in which I carried it through.

The account I gave to Miss Avory of the meeting in the drawing-room shortly after the gentlemen had left the house, was accurate enough. But no words will express what I felt when I stood in that room with

the four gentlemen ranged on one side of the table gazing at the impostor, whose nonchalance filled me with alarm. Had I guessed that we had a secret witness in Miss Ivory I believe I should have lost all control over myself, so convinced should I have been that her keen eyes would master the truth at once.

Just as I had anticipated, the success of the scheme was owing to its audacity.

Mr. Skerlock and Mr. Hastings had seen Mr. Ransome ; the other two might probably have never set eyes on him. But their ignorance of the real man was a consideration that, I took care, should not occur to them. Mr. Ransome had been reported murdered ; to disprove the report he had come to Gardenhurst. Witnesses were invited to behold him. They came to see Mr. Ransome. It was impossible they should conceive that any other man but Mr. Ransome was likely to be introduced to them. It was their honest persuasion that Mr. Ransome stood before them. They left the house, to a man, satisfied.

This was, I daresay, a trick which would have been impracticable to any man who

stood less high than myself in the general esteem. The stratagem cost me my honour ; but I was content to make the sacrifice ; for my honour was of little worth to me whilst my daughter lay under the darkest of suspicions.

Mr. Cleveland did not act his part well. But had he acted it ten times worse than he did, no doubt of his identity would have been excited. He remained a quarter of an hour in the room ; and the moment Mr. Ledbury, who had been pompously inveighing against his cruelty, was silent, he bowed and walked out. I followed him, and as I opened the hall-door, slipped the bank-notes I had promised into his hand.

"Take my warmest thanks for what you have done," I whispered.

"All right," he replied. "Keep your promise ;" by which he meant the promise I had made him not to inquire into his past. He left the house, and I have never heard of him from that day to this.

I lingered until I heard the fly that waited for him drive off. I then rejoined the others.

The worst of the ordeal was over. I had

both the nerve and the spirit now to act my part well. Mr. Skerlock came up and congratulated me on the resolution I had shown in bringing the man to the house. My remedy, he said, in summoning witnesses might be considered by some an extreme measure. But in his opinion I was perfectly justified in doing what I had done.

"It is idle to deny," he exclaimed, addressing the others, "that public opinion has been excited against Mrs. Ransome by her mother-in-law's accusation. It is true that Mrs. Ransome has not been formally charged with the commission of the deed which public prejudice has placed to her account. But a sensitive mind will find but little difference between the humiliation of a legal inquiry and the humiliation of gossip. It behoved Colonel Kilmain to spare no efforts to prove his daughter an innocent woman. I rejoice in the triumph of his efforts and congratulate him on his successful vindication of his child."

Sir Anthony spoke to the same effect; and then Mr. Hastings made a speech in which he exhorted me to direct my efforts

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towards a reconciliation between the husband and wife.

To this I replied that I had done all I meant to do ; and shuffled out of that embarrassing view of the question by begging the gentlemen to help themselves to wine.

There was a bitter irony in all this, which I felt more acutely when I was alone and recalled the scene and the conversation.

Yet I might have hoped that, when they were out of the house, some degree of tranquillity, some sense of security would have returned to me. But scarcely was the hall-door closed upon them when I thought of Miss Ivory. I dreaded meeting her infinitely more than I had dreaded the interview between Mr. Cleveland and the witnesses. When, after I had called her to join my daughter and me in the drawing-room, she had spoken of having seen "Mr. Ransome" through the window, my dismay was so profound that, but for the ready relief I obtained from the excuse she gave me to run to the window to see if Poole were there, my agitation must then and there have betrayed me.

And yet in a few days the mystery was to be cleared up. Had Johnson but delayed writing to me for those few days, I should have been spared the deception I practised, which, abundantly as I can excuse its commission, I can never recur to without pain and remorse. The sense of the wrong my daughter and I had jointly perpetrated estranged us. A deeper gloom gathered over both of us; for whilst, on my part, no effort could crush out of my heart the detestable suspicion of her, which sickened my waking thoughts, and poisoned my dreams at night; so, on her side, the thoughts of the barbarous injustice that had been done her was rendered more poignant yet by the remembrance that she had connived at a deception to vindicate the innocence which should never have been doubted.

Other sources of anxiety contributed to make my life, at this period, a burden. I instinctively felt that Miss Ivory's suspicions were excited; that though she could find no reason for challenging the identity of the man I had brought to the house, she was full of distrust. The necessity of seem-

ing to her other than I was, of conversing as though Mr. Ransome's discovery were an accomplished fact, was an odious and unbearable trial to me.

Again, I was haunted by the fear that Mr. Cleveland might betray me. At the onset, I had felt satisfied that my secret would be safe with him; but my confidence was diminished by my nervousness, and by the consideration that he was poor; that he was unscrupulous (as I might judge by the readiness with which he had fallen into my scheme); and that he might threaten me with exposure if I refused to buy his silence.

Existence became intolerable. My scheme had, indeed, succeeded so far as my daughter's character was concerned; but I was soon taught that, though her innocence was established, the evil repute that had so long hung about her name still lingered, and would take a long long while to become extinct. With the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Skerlock, and Mr. Hastings, no one called on us. There was only one remedy for this state of things—to quit the country. I abhorred the name of Copsford. Garden-

hurst had grown hateful to us both as the scene of miseries which memory would find ineffaceable. If I delayed carrying out my resolution it was because I doubted the wisdom of abrupt departure. Life seemed so full of contingencies that I knew not what to-morrow might bring forth. The discovery of Maddox, for instance, might expose the whole of my conspiracy; and if that exposure happened, and Mr. Ransome remained unfound, the public would assuredly leap to the conclusion that my daughter was actually guilty of her husband's death, that I was aware of the fact, and that I had adopted the extraordinary measure of introducing an impostor to the house, in the hope of effectually averting suspicion.

Such was the state of affairs when the dead body was found under the trees at the foot of the estate. Many years have passed since that time, but the horror with which the news of the discovery affected me is as fresh in my memory now as if the event had taken place yesterday. My belief was that the body was Mr. Ransome's. I plunged into the trees alone, for the gardeners had not the courage to follow me;

but the spectacle that met my gaze was too loathsome for me to examine. Not until the body was in the coffin was I enabled to take note of the details of its ghastliness; and then I was satisfied that it was not Mr. Ransome. Yet how came the letters belonging to Mr. Ransome in the pocket of the coat on the body? The jury's finding was worthless as respected the solution of this new mystery. But as to the verdict itself, I had anticipated it on the mere strength of the evidence of Mr. Ransome's hair being black, and the hair of the body being brown. Miss Ivory spoke to me afterwards of Poole; how he had sworn that the dead man was Mr. Ransome; how he had declared that the man I had brought to the house was an impostor. I can scarcely recal the impression this information made on me, for the final event followed so rapidly that my memory grows confused in trying to separate the actions and emotions of that bewildering day. But one conviction seized, and never left me—that in some way Poole was connected with the mystery that had perplexed and overwhelmed us since the long gone-by fateful month of July.

How Mr. Ransome came to the house on the night following the day on which the inquest was held, and how he died, you have read ; the truth is perfectly told in Miss Ivory's statement. It was not the ending I could have chosen for the unhappy man ; but being done, it was not to be wished undone. It terminated for him a life that would have been worse than a hundred deaths ; whilst it dismissed his wife from an abhorred companionship, and liberated her from a servitude so unbearable that the mere story of it does not convey one fraction of its real anguish.

Had any of the gentlemen whom I had invited to bear witness to the existence of Mr. Cleveland as Mr. Ransome attended the inquest (which, as in the former case, was held at Gardenhurst, owing to the distance at which it was situated from Copsford), it was almost certain that the trick I had practised on them would have been discovered. The dead man, with his sunken wasted face, his beard, his wild, neglected hair, bore but little resemblance to the man I had introduced : nor was it possible that the change could have been accounted for by

the brief time that had elapsed since he was supposed to have come to the house, smooth-cheeked, healthy-looking, trimly attired, decorous in manner and aspect. But the jury knew of this only on hearsay. The witnesses, comprising my daughter, myself, Miss Ivory, the cook, and the upper-gardener Walters, all swore to his being Mr. Ransome. The jury were satisfied: people who were not present, and did not therefore see the corpse, were equally satisfied; and the funeral, which took place three days afterwards, found and left everybody, with three exceptions, perfectly persuaded that the Mr. Ransome whom the four gentlemen had seen, and the Mr. Ransome upon whom the inquest had been held, were one and the same person.

The three exceptions were my daughter and myself, of course, and Miss Ivory. She had guessed the truth the moment she set eyes on the real man. The doubts which had long haunted her scarcely needed this confirmation of their accuracy.

I consulted with my daughter and asked her if Miss Ivory should be taken into our confidence. We were about to leave Garden-

hurst for ever. My daughter could hardly find a better, a more faithful, and a more sympathetic companion than her housekeeper, who had proved herself in every respect superior to her position, and who was well qualified to be raised to a higher and more congenial footing.

My conversation with Phœbe resulted in my having a long interview with Miss Ivory, to whom I imparted the whole story of my plot. She listened without surprise, without interruption, without demonstration of *any* kind, and when I had ended, said—

“Had I been in your place I should have done the same thing, sir. We know the accusation to be false *now*: but Mrs. Ransome always knew it to be false. When I think of what she has been made to suffer, I cannot imagine any deception, any trick, any effort to prove her guiltless, unworthy or in any sense unwarrantable.”

I told her that she was the only person, unless I excepted Mr. Ransome's personator, who knew of the scheme; and I added that my reason for taking her into my confidence was to prepare the way for offering her the post of companion to my daughter. She

was overjoyed by the proposal, and accepted it at once : and it was in this way that she came to reside with us.

I sold Gardenhurst, and quitted it for Tours, at which place we resided for some years after leaving England. There was only one person in Copsford to whom I bade farewell—Mr. Skerlock, whose kindness to my daughter and myself throughout our trying experience, I could never forget.

The sale of the estate, however, detained me unwillingly for some time longer than I wished ; and I tried to put the delay to some use by inquiring where Mr. Ransome had concealed himself during the long months he had been absent from his home. But my efforts proved fruitless. I never succeeded in obtaining any information respecting him, in discovering a single creature who had met him.

My conclusions, however, in which Miss Avory concurred, were probably near the truth. I supposed that he had left the house in a fit of madness, impelled by his horror of the threat Miss Avory had implied, and by his serious persuasion that she would contrive to have her threat executed.

The words he had made use of to her proved his belief that up to the moment of his conversation with the housekeeper in the drawing-room that day when his mother was in the house, his secret, or in other words his madness, was unsuspected. There was nothing for it then but to suppose that the fear which Miss Ivory's professed discovery had inspired, added to his horror of being confined in an Asylum, had driven him from the house, and kept him a wanderer during the long space of time that separated his disappearance from his return. Whether he was actually the man whom Johnson had followed to Guildford and there lost sight of, it was impossible to guess. But it was past all question that the object of his return to Gardenhurst was to shoot his wife.

On this part of the mystery I can throw no further light; nor is it possible to state, on more authoritative grounds than conjecture, that his mother was really sincere in believing that he had been murdered.

And Maddox; and the dead man whom we had found in Gardenhurst, with letters on him belonging to Mr. Ransome?

Some years had to elapse before this perplexity was unriddled.

Poole had left Gardenhurst a few days before the return of Mr. Ransome. He was away from his work one day, and next morning Walters told me that he had met him, and that he had said he didn't mean to do any more work for Colonel Kilmain.

I was too much harassed and troubled at the time to think much of this; but I was pleased that the man had dismissed himself from my service, as I had resolved to get rid of him, but hardly knew how to do so without implying that his discharge was owing to his assertion that the man I had brought to the house was an impostor.

After Mr. Ransome's death and funeral I often thought of Maddox, and of the dead body we had found, and of the probable share that Poole had in the mystery; but his absence frustrated my curiosity, and my stay in England being enforced for a few weeks, I was unwilling to rake up the ashes of the past by making any other inquiries than those I was secretly pro-

secuting with respect to Mr. Ransome's actions and hiding-places during his disappearance.

Four years after I had left Gardenhurst I came to London on business for a week. I stopped at a hotel at the West End, and was one morning reading a newspaper, when my attention was attracted by some closely-printed matter, headed "Confession of Murder!" I looked down the column, and saw the name—James Poole.

I began to read.

The confession was to this effect—

A man named James Poole had called at the office of the Superintendent of Police at Copsford, and asked permission to make a statement. He said that five years ago he was employed as under-gardener on the estate formerly belonging to Colonel Kilmain, called Gardenhurst. The name of the footman in the service of the family was Maddox. One day Maddox proposed that they should rob the house. A quantity of valuable plate was kept in a safe in the housekeeper's room: he had taken the impression of the lock in wax, and sent it to

a chum of his in London, who had forwarded him a key made from the impression. He wanted assistance to carry off the plate, secrete it, and dispose of it by degrees. Poole lived in a small cottage away from the town, which offered a good hiding-place for the booty, and Poole could send small parcels of it from time to time to Maddox, in London, who would convert the silver into money.

Poole consented, and a night for the robbery was fixed upon. On that night Mr. Ransome left the house. By what Maddox afterwards told Poole, who waited for him in the avenue, it appeared that the footman on quitting his bedroom was alarmed by hearing some one moving on the landing beneath. He looked over the banister, and saw a figure glide out of Mr. Ransome's bedroom, and go downstairs. After waiting a short time he descended, and peeped into Mr. Ransome's bedroom, the door of which was open, and there found a candle burning. There was nobody in the room. He listened, and heard footsteps outside the house hurrying towards the

avenue. Poole believed that Maddox robbed his master's room during this interval, he having afterwards heard that the drawers had been ransacked. The dressing-case, of which there had been some talk, he knew nothing about. That, he dared say, Mr. Ransome took away with him. After a long time Maddox came out of the house through the drawing-room window, which he said he had found open, and met Poole, who told him that Mr. Ransome had just gone through the avenue, creeping along in a strange way. Maddox answered, with a laugh, that if he came back he'd miss a coat, for he had taken the liberty of putting on one of the coats he had found hanging behind the door, so that if his description should be given, he would not be known by his clothes. Fearing that Mr. Ransome might be lingering at the gates, Poole proposed that they should bear the sack containing the plate to the trees, and make for the cottage by the way of the fields. He had armed himself with a bludgeon in case of being met or followed; he declared that the temptation to kill Maddox did not

enter his mind until they were among the trees ; and the devil whispered that one blow would make him master of the booty in the sack ; and, in a moment, he struck his companion with all his strength across the face, between the eyes, with the bludgeon, and the man fell backwards with a groan, and expired. Poole left him where he lay, and hoisting the sack on his shoulders, made for his cottage, where he hid the sack, and taking a spade, returned and buried Maddox, after emptying his pockets, under the trees, near the hedge, where he was found. He did not feel his crime then, nor for a long while afterwards. He worked as usual on the estate for fear that if he left it, he should be suspected of having had a hand in the double disappearance which was puzzling everybody. He further stated that his object in swearing that the body when found was Mr. Ransome's, was that people might believe the missing master had been murdered by Maddox. For the last two years he had been haunted by his crime night and day, and was now a doomed man and forced to

confess his guilt. If they doubted his story let them pull up the flooring of the cottage where he had lived, and there they'd find the sack of plate. The report added that the cottage had been searched, and the sack containing the plate discovered.

That was all.

I had come to England for a week only ; but I had to stop a month. For next day I went down to Copsford, identified my daughter's property, and was bound over to give evidence at the forthcoming assizes. The trial was purely formal. The prisoner pleaded guilty and had declined counsel's aid. The duty of judge and jury was therefore not very arduous ; the one returned a verdict, the other passed sentence, and the following week the man was hanged.

Since that time I have often been tempted to commit this story to paper : but have invariably been deterred by considerations having reference wholly to my daughter. Those considerations are no longer paramount ; the wrong I committed I may now expiate by public confession. Some few I

doubt not may yet be living who will not be displeased at an opportunity of reading the true history of the strange affair that took place many years ago, which excited much interest at the time, and was long afterwards remembered as the Copsford Mystery.

THE END.

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